



Municipal Library,

NAINI TAL.



Class No. 928

Book No. J 67 H

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A JOURNALIST

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

by

MICHAEL JOSEPH

**HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) LTD.
PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.**

Durgā Pāṭha Municipal Library,

J. M. T. I.

दुर्गापाठ = रामनिधन लाइब्रेरी

लाइब्रेरी

Class No. क्रियांग 728

Book No. पत्रक J. 67. A

Received 'm. Nov. 1948.

3199

Made and Printed in Great Britain at
The Mayflower Press, Plymouth. William Brendon & Son, Ltd.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA	21
II. ADVERTISEMENT WRITING AS AN ADVENTURE	44
III. HOW I LEARNED JOURNALISM	78
IV. FLEET STREET AT LAST	106
V. ADVENTURES ON THE NEWS TRAIL	137
VI. MORE ADVENTURES IN JOURNALISM	166
VII. NEWS-HUNTING—AND A NEW DEPARTURE	182
VIII. INTERVIEWING AMERICA	206
IX. IN SEARCH OF BREAD AND BUTTER	219
X. EDITING A WEEKLY PAPER—FIRST EFFORTS AT FICTION	243
XI. EDITING AND AUTHORSHIP	258
XII. REFLECTIONS	277

INTRODUCTORY

TO preface this autobiography merely with a few eulogistic sentences would be inadequate. There are several reasons why an *apologia* is necessary to the reader's appreciation. For this is not a conventional autobiography and seems to me to need an explanation. Originally—for I was present at the birth of the idea—it was to have been mainly instructional in purpose. If the story yielded, in journalism's phrase, "human interest," so much the better. I will not presume to anticipate the reader's judgment, but, for my part, I have found the story a remarkable human document. Invaluable as it will undoubtedly be to the young man or woman attracted to journalism as a career, its chief interest lies in its humanity.

It is the plain story of a poor boy who has realised his ambitions. The author is to-day a young man who edits periodicals with imperial circulations, and writes novels, books, articles and short stories in his spare time. To those who regard anyone associated with journalism and literature as a mysterious being with strange habits, this ambition may seem quite incomprehensible. All grades of society appear to combine in regarding the literary man as "queer." Go into the village inn and let it be known you are an author or a journalist or even vaguely that you "write," and the locals will shift their feet uneasily and call abstractedly for more refreshment. In

Introductory

country houses and town mansions almost any eccentricity of behaviour is tolerated or at least explained by one's connection with the strange art. Indeed eccentricity seems to be generally expected and patent is people's surprise or disappointment when an author turns out to be a respectable citizen with a clean collar, an ordinary tie and well-groomed hair. If the writing man is not eccentric in appearance and absent-minded by habit the only alternative expected of him is vulgar and persistent curiosity and the rapid production of notebook and pencil. That is, in effect, the stage representation of author or journalist, and it is well known that the theatre habitually gives its patrons what they expect.

We who live in a more or less literary atmosphere are inclined to forget that outside our little world of books and papers the author and journalist are considered creatures strange and incomprehensible. Most of you who read this book will have been drawn to it by professional or amateur interest in the author's self-revealed occupation, so I make no apology for referring to the oddity generally attributed to literary folk, from the editor of *The Times* and Mr. Bernard Shaw to the humblest sub-editor and minor poet. Most of those who read these pages will understand the author's emotions and will sympathise with his ambitions; the rest may be vouchsafed a glimpse of the enthusiasm which makes journalism and authorship an attraction irresistible to so many.

The author, as I have said, is young. The reminiscences of young men are not in these days at all remarkable; indeed, they are depressingly common. But since our author prefers to remain anonymous he is at least acquitted of the motive which appears to

Introductory

have inspired most, if not all, of the young men's reminiscences. We shall find him occasionally egotistical—what ambitious young man is not?—but his egotism, thus masked under anonymity, becomes modesty. I know, and assure the reader, that this book would never have been written in any other form.

Yet it seems to me to owe much of its interest and value to the comparative youth of its author. He is one of Fleet Street's youngest editors—young enough to recapture the spirit of his boyhood's enthusiasm, and to sympathise with the aims and ideals of the present generation. His vitality and ambition are as keen as ever and his opinions and advice are not those of an old man out of touch with the times and the stirring pulses of youth.

His autobiography thus has a quality which makes it, in my experience of similar literature, unique. It is, as I have indicated, in tune with the present generation. His progress covers the post-war years; it is a record, not of yesterday, but of to-day. Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* and *From Log Cabin to White House*, estimable as they must have been in the eyes of our fathers, have lost their inspiration to-day. Fundamentally, no doubt, the qualities which made for success in past generations are equally necessary to-day; but it seems to me that the force of example must lose much of its appeal when it becomes historical. And to the post-war generation the days of Samuel Smiles's heroes and President Garfield already belong to history.

To that extent, therefore, this book must appeal to all youngsters on the threshold of their careers, whether they be destined for journalism or engineering, stockbroking or shopkeeping. As a record of

Introductory

achievement in the face of difficulties it should be a source of inspiration to all young people who want to make a success of their lives.

From earliest boyhood the author of this book was determined to succeed. His family met with financial misfortune in his childhood and his schooldays ended abruptly. At the age of twelve he became, out of necessity, an office boy at half a crown a week. In all these early days of privation the flame of his ambition burned steadily clear. He was resolved to become a journalist. A shy, sensitive, "physically frail" child, he read everything he could lay hands on—cheap periodicals, newspapers, anything. Even earlier, at the age of ten, sitting up at nights he filled exercise books with a "novel." It was a romance of the Indian Mutiny, 10,000 words long. Proudly revealed to his family, it was received without enthusiasm. The knowledge that his parents and brothers regarded his ambition with indifference did not deter him.

The only encouragement he received in his early days came from a kind-hearted German lady who concealed her heroism in allowing the boy to read aloud to her the romance of the Indian Mutiny and rewarded him with sixpence—magnificent riches, which he promptly invested in more exercise books and ink. Then there was later an uncle from New York who, incredible as it seemed, had actually owned and controlled newspapers in America. The small boy absorbed advice like a sponge, listened eagerly to his uncle's glowing words about the future of advertising and, as soon as his uncle had sailed, set to work to make advertising the next rung in the ladder he had determined to climb. But this was to come

Introductory

later. Economic necessity obliged him to work daily, first as an office boy, then as a junior clerk in an estate agent's office ; but all his spare time was devoted to writing. He wrote for the love of writing. Most of his efforts were destroyed ; some were sent to various papers and of course came back with printed rejection slips. He made all sorts of mistakes ; but, as his narrative shows, he was careful to profit by them.

The estate agent's office gave him welcome access to a typewriter, which he taught himself to use. His mind was not entirely absorbed by his journalistic aims ; he showed intelligence and enterprise in his regular work, and was promoted accordingly. Interest in the business of estate agency led indirectly to the publication of his first article, after years of futile effort. It had dawned on him that what one wrote about was the most important thing in free-lance journalism and that possible subjects were under his nose. So he proceeded to write a short article dealing with "To Let" boards. It was accepted by *Answers*. It was after this initial success—for which he was paid 7s. 6d.—that the American uncle paid the family a visit and fired our author with the desire to make practical progress by means of the relatively new science of advertising. The simple calculation that if an article which took an evening to write earned 7s. 6d., a weekly income of £2 12s. 6d. was assured to the industrious free-lance journalist, soon proved hopelessly misleading. The "To Let" boards article was, alas ! a fugitive success, and the young journalist soon found himself confronted with rejection slips as regularly as he submitted manuscripts.

It would not be fair to suggest that he turned to advertising in a mood of despair. As his story shows,

Introductory

he never despaired in spite of all the disappointments and drawbacks. Rather was this new enterprise an outlet for his remarkable vitality. The story of his efforts to convert the tradesmen of mid-Sussex to the benefits of modern publicity methods has its amusing side, but we cannot doubt the earnestness nor begrudge credit for the perseverance which he displayed. Nor were his efforts confined to his own neighbourhood. He confesses that he wrote to the Heinz corporation offering to organise the whole of their European advertising for £5 a week! His enterprise is also revealed in the entertaining account of "Lawbourne's," the advertising agency he founded. The "firm's" notepaper bore the name of a mythical partner—invented to impress the local tradespeople who otherwise would surely have distrusted the ability of one so young as this advertising "expert"! His experiences at the time were enough to discourage the most stout-hearted, but nothing turned him from his purpose. Not even the outbreak of war. Denied enlistment by his failure to pass the medical examination, he at once began work on an ambitious diary of the deeds of Sussex men in the Great War. This was never completed (and it is characteristic of our author's journalistic instinct that he regrets the premature destruction of his accumulated material), for the war threw him, along with the rest of his generation, into the melting-pot.

He became a temporary Civil Servant and then chance brought him into contact with a professional journalist. Eager to learn, desperately anxious to become a journalist himself, he made use of every opportunity. He met other literary men and eventually—great moment!—an editor.

Introductory

This editor was destined to become his friend. He encouraged the aspiring youngster by giving him his first commission—an interview with a child actress. By this time our author, having profited by his own mistakes and by the kindly tuition of his Civil Service colleague, was qualified, in spite of his own misgivings, to undertake the task. For a shy youth—and how shy he must have been I leave his own narrative to reveal—the interview must have been an ordeal. One gathers that the child actress and her mother did most of the interviewing. But he stuck to his guns, wrote and rewrote the resulting article and had later the satisfaction of seeing it in print.

His second commission—again from the friendly editor—was even more embarrassing. He found himself obliged to collect material for a series of articles on Twilight Sleep. His own description of the ordeal of interviewing doctors, nurses, mothers and their babies, is revealing. How many bashful and inexperienced youngsters, I wonder, would have undertaken the ordeal as resolutely as he did?

For this fortnight's work, done in his spare time, he received £7 10s. od., and the future seemed assured. If ever in his dark moments he had been assailed by moods of doubt or despair, no such anxiety troubled him now. He had chosen well. Journalism had claimed him for its own.

Then begins that part of his story which, I venture to predict, will be of most interest to those readers who contemplate a journalistic career. I have found the description of his further free-lance successes, his appointment to the staff of a newspaper and his experiences as a working journalist absorbingly interesting. The passages which describe the inside of a

Introductory

newspaper office during the war are particularly illuminating. The noise of the machines and the smell of printers' ink are brought vividly to our senses. Here we are in the *arcana* of journalism—Fleet Street itself.

Not content with the achievement of a staff position and the right to call himself a real journalist at last, the author finds one outlet after another for his extraordinary vitality—extending his scope as a free lance, writing on films and the future of aircraft, interviewing political and industrial celebrities, organising a national Boot Fund, writing countless gossip paragraphs for other newspapers, undertaking in emergencies the work of special contributors, pioneering syndication in England ; in fact, the whole gamut of journalism. We see his horizon steadily widening, his confidence in himself gradually increasing. We are admitted to his inmost thoughts and confessions. Unconsciously he reveals his character, and although nowhere in his narrative does he refer to character as the essential foundation for success in journalism, it can be seen plainly enough that what makes the successful journalist is not so much literary ability, or a “news-sense,” or intellectual brilliance (although all these qualities are desirable) as a fundamental honesty of purpose and an unflagging industry. It is commonly assumed that literary ability is the primary qualification for the journalistic apprentice, but one of the first discoveries I made in Fleet Street was that journalism, whatever else it may be, is not a literary profession. This is how our author sums up his journalistic philosophy—“To make a good living at journalism you must either write very well or very fast.” But his own narrative is more eloquent.

Introductory

The end of the war, like the beginning, threw everything into the melting-pot again. Changes were inevitable. Rejoining his old editor at a higher salary, the author soon finds himself on the choppy seas of post-war conditions. A visit to the United States, financed by his own efforts, provides him with fresh experience, and little else, for on his return he discovers that the only thing permanent in journalism is change, and finds himself obliged to begin all over again as a free lance. And this, to my mind, is the most inspiring part of his narrative.

To intrude here a personal note, it was at this time that I first made the author's acquaintance. In the light of my own stormy editorial experiences I was able to appreciate the courage and perseverance with which he set to work in that most precarious occupation, free-lance journalism. Nothing daunted him ; everything was potential material. If one source proved unproductive he turned without complaint or delay to another. In this way he explored London's "Chinatown" and exposed the perils of the hidden Limehouse gambling dens ; investigated in the Rhondda Valley the conditions of the miners and their families (ten years ago, before other writers realised how they were going to monopolise the news in the years ahead) ; described the homecoming of the Prince of Wales after an Empire tour—all journalistically profitable. By dint of enterprise and hard work he regained his position, only to experience the loss of his most valuable market in the death of the *Globe*.

But a wise free lance puts some eggs in other baskets and his connection as a regular contributor to a weekly paper gave him the opportunity of another

Introductory

staff appointment. On this paper he progressed rapidly ; it is, in fact, one of the papers he is editing to-day.

I have no need to comment on his qualities as an editor, for he reveals his ideals clearly enough. For him editing is not a job in the ordinary sense of the word. Indeed, he expresses astonishment that for work so delightful anyone should be paid. His enthusiasm makes plain his efficiency. I, who know him and his reputation in Fleet Street, could endorse that with a hundred instances of his ability, his flair for material, his energy, his consideration for struggling contributors—all the qualities, indeed, which go to the making of a successful editor. Without egotism, he himself sheds occasional light on his editorial reputation. He says, for example, referring to an unanswered letter written in his earliest days to an editor—"I have never forgotten that experience ; that is one of the reasons why it is a rule on the papers I control to-day, that any manuscript, however amateurish, which shows the slightest promise, is referred to either one of my assistant editors or myself, and returned with a specially dictated letter explaining why it is unsuitable, and giving any superficial hints possible for the guidance of the writer."

No one after reading the later chapters of this book, is entitled to believe that an editor is a mere figurehead. At best it is a responsible and strenuous job, demanding inexhaustible vitality and enthusiasm. Yet, with the increasing responsibility of editorship, the author has found time for fiction and further free-lance activity, and has published several books of general interest.

Introductory

Is this remarkable activity due to the many-sidedness of his talents? Rather, I should say, to his industry. Having acquired the habit early in life, he retains to this day the appetite for work. It is no disparagement of his ability to give the chief credit for his success to his industry. At all events it has largely contributed to his present position. The moral points itself.

The author concludes his narrative with a survey of journalism to-day. He points out, fairly, that the financial prospects of the journalist's career are relatively uninviting. He refers, at various points in his story, to the increasing competition with which the new-comer to journalism has to contend. In this respect I consider he over-estimates the difficulties. It is quite true that the journalistic market-place is overcrowded with applicants and would-be writers. But the majority of these sometimes patient, more often impatient, amateurs are so hopelessly unqualified, and seemingly cannot or will not educate themselves to an appreciation of elementary requirements that, beyond fraying editorial tempers, they do not prejudice the prospects of the new recruit of real ability.

Journalism, one supposes, will always be a honey-pot for the flies bred by our educational system. Nowadays every Tom, Dick and Harry imagines himself a potential journalist. As an occupation, its advantages are obvious. There is no professional qualification; anyone is at liberty to write and submit material for publication; anyone may apply for a sub-editor's post (many of the applications I have seen indicate that some would evidently not be content with so modest a beginning); and, worst of all, anyone who has written a letter to a local newspaper or been told by flattering friends that his

Introductory

letters are "so interesting," firmly believes, and refuses to disbelieve, that he is possessed of latent literary genius.

It is extraordinary, but true, that people do not leave concert halls and picture galleries with such remarks as "I could sing (or compose) better than that," or "I could paint better pictures than that"; but how often does one hear readers of books and magazines say disgustedly, "I could write better stuff than that." And the tragedy is that they take up their pens and try.

But the phenomenon is familiar enough in Fleet Street and the hard-working class of sub-editors learn to recognise the signs of amateur incompetence almost instinctively. So little harm is done. Genuine talent, even in the embryo stage, is eagerly welcomed. Every editor of my acquaintance is alert to discover new and promising writers.

Journalism is a hard school and its rewards are precarious, but no one will deny that it is the most democratic profession. There are no social barriers, and "influence"—that abused word!—counts for little. It may help some but the lack of it will not hinder others. The following pages amply testify to the opportunities afforded by journalism.

This story of one who, handicapped by poverty, frail physique, lack of education, and, perhaps worst of all, an "inferiority complex," has yet contrived to overcome the difficulties which beset the present-day path of journalism, is an inspiring narrative. In many respects it is comparable with the story of Edward Bok, the poor Dutch immigrant boy who began by cleaning a baker's window for fifty cents a week and rose to the editorship of that great American magazine,

Introductory

the *Ladies' Home Journal*. It is valuable not only as a record of achievement, but as a picture of the life of the journalist, with all its ups and downs, its disappointments and its tremendous compensations. It is not a text-book of theory, but a chapter from life.

The author's success has not been founded on a fortuitous literary reputation ; he is one of Arnold Bennett's company of "business men who write from ten to fifty thousand words a week without chattering about it." He confesses to having written—and sold—over four hundred short stories in a relatively short time ; to having on one occasion provided himself with a £200 motor-car by contributing a quarter of a million words to boys' papers at a guinea a thousand. His work does not command "fancy" prices ; his achievement is the result of—to use his own phrase—"hard work and big output." His story, with Arnold Bennett's delightful *The Truth About an Author*, should be read by every would-be author and journalist.

MICHAEL JOSEPH.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A JOURNALIST

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA

IT is generally supposed that every boy cherishes an ambition at some time or other to become an engine-driver. I must have been an exception, for no machinery of any sort ever interested me in my younger days as much as books and papers.

Until the age of eight I paid little or no attention to the career problem, but by that birthday twin "urges" had begun a tug-of-war for the possession of my youthful soul. Account books filled with figures fascinated me and I believe I toyed with the idea of becoming a king of commerce; preferably, for some reason now lost in the mists of time, a supermanufacturer of biscuits. At the same time I was even then an avaricious reader of newspapers and the more popular magazines, and the possibility of one day writing books for which people would pay the sum of six shillings nett, which was the usual price in those days for a novel, undoubtedly intrigued me.

Biscuits or books? Success in either career seemed equally remote. How was a poor boy, without money, without influence, and with an "education" of the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

sort obtained in one of the inefficient "private" schools which blighted England in pre-war days, to begin?

Most boys are content to leave such problems to settle themselves, or at any rate ignore them until schooldays are over. But my case was different. I grew up under a sense of injustice which made me grapple with the problem at an earlier age than I might otherwise have done. When I was only five years old my father lost in business every penny he had made by thirty years of hard work. Economic forces, which my youthful mind did not understand and over which I had no control, relegated my family and myself to a life of poverty.

That fact would have nothing to do with this story but for its profound reaction on my mind. Like other men of my generation faced with similar disaster, my father's changed fortunes destroyed all his hope of providing me with an adequate education. I was obliged to go out into the world at the earliest possible moment in order to help my brothers in the responsibility of keeping our home together.

Deprived of the prospect of going to a public school I was not dismayed. I was intent on settling down to the important job of restoring the family fortunes by wooing either biscuits or books. I did not want to waste time learning things which it seemed to me would be of doubtful value in later life.

At school I was from the first a rebel. If a subject appealed to me, I usually managed to tackle it better than anyone else. If it did not, I refused to think about it at all. And no amount of punishment would make me change my mind.

I do not defend myself. At the age of eight I

The Birth of an Idea

suppose I was the complete individualist, admitting no man's right to dictate what I should or should not learn. No wonder that on a school report which I still possess I find the comment, "Quick, but disobedient." If I could have five minutes' talk with the headmaster of that school to-day, I would point out to him the folly of trying to squeeze the personality of every boy into the same mould. Certainly I have never regretted the intransigent attitude of those early years.

It has often been pointed out that in Fleet Street to-day men from the public schools and universities are outnumbered by those who have been educated mainly by their efforts to earn their own living, which is suggestive. In my experience the University mind does not shine in journalism. Many of the best-known journalists of our generation started life as tape boys, pasting up messages from the tape machines in a newspaper office.

At that time I had never been to London and did not know that such things as tape machines existed. Such newspapers as I saw were bought by my brothers or borrowed from friends. I understood but little of what I read. Yet I did read. That taste for topical reading matter would have supplied a psycho-analyst, had such people then been heard of, with the first important clue to the fact that I possessed that appetite for knowledge of the world which is part of the stock-in-trade of the journalist.

For two years I hesitated before the fateful decision which would make either biscuits or books my aim. I spent many hours considering the alternatives in the attic bedroom of my home. "Bothering your head about things," my mother called it.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

After two years of "bothering" the question was decided by a careful comparison of economic conditions. To start even a small biscuit factory needed money. "Fifty thousand pounds," my father said, not knowing why I asked. It might as well have been fifty thousand pence. My entire capital was represented by two hands and a brain full of untried ideas, probably quite impracticable ideas.

On the other hand, where writing was concerned, the economic position was very different. Given an exercise book, ink, a pen, and an urge to tell a story, anyone can write a book, or at least a substantial chunk of a book, at a cost of about threepence.

Here was my chance of beginning a career without delay. I forgot all about biscuits and the dream of a successful business career and settled down to writing—a novel! The fact that only threepence was needed, and that I had that much capital, was, I thought without regret, the factor which had robbed the world of a business genius. I know now that had I not decided to take up writing as a career at the age of ten, the decision would only have been delayed. Of no other work, profession—call it what you will—is it so true that sooner or later the man who has the instinct in his blood will turn to it. Indeed, so strong is the lure of literature and journalism that the ranks of writing folk are swollen by many thousands of others who have not and never will have the "flair" which is in journalism what genius is in art, but who nevertheless cling to their belief that they can "write" despite all the disappointments of snubs and rejection slips. *Cacoethes scribendi* is an almost incurable disease.

The novel was entitled *The Siege of the Haven of*

The Birth of an Idea

Refuge. It took six months to write and was about 10,000 words long. It was a story of the Indian Mutiny, for, with that unerring instinct for making mistakes which I shared with every beginner in journalism and authorship, I chose for the background of my story a country I had never visited, and a period of history of which I knew next to nothing.

By writing the book in bed at nights I managed to keep my secret from the rest of the family until it was finished. Of all the likely results of writing that tale, the only one I feared was ridicule. Had my parents laughed at me I should no doubt have persevered just the same, so firmly was I convinced of my literary destiny.

Everyone who has ever written a line knows the anxiety to have another's opinion on his work, and is familiar with the trepidation with which that opinion is awaited. The very night after I had married off the inevitable hero and heroine, freed at last from the cruel Indian's tyranny, I produced it with a palpitating heart, and announced that I had written my first book.

Considering that I was only ten the sensation caused was smaller than one might imagine. In my family circle I was not hailed as an infant prodigy. My brothers read it, and were visibly torn between open merriment and a sneaking pride that it should have been produced by a member of their family. Their attitude was a compromise between utter scorn and the diplomacy of not saying too much in case I grew up—devastating thought!—to “write for the newspapers.”

My father was not interested. He merely expressed

The Autobiography of a Journalist

the opinion that writing books could do no harm provided I "got over it" before I was old enough to fulfil my real mission in life, which was to become an office boy. Writing books might even improve my handwriting, it was suggested, in which case it was to be encouraged, my handwriting at that time being notoriously below even the low standard expected in the average Brighton office (Brighton was the nearest town and my probable destination).

For at least a week I hoped for some crumb of encouragement. I did not imagine that the book was publishable. Writing it had been a labour of love and what I wanted was appreciation.

It is often said, usually by those who have had the benefit of a good education, and who enjoy influential friendships, that no boy need lack encouragement and advice. But at this time there was not one person with an education superior to the board school standard to whom I could turn for advice. Since those days I have met many successful men who have told me that when similarly placed they were helped by the local vicar, or by the librarian at the free library. I was too shy to ask the advice of people I did not know. I believed, mistakenly of course, that I should only have been laughed at for my pains.

My first encouragement came from an unexpected source. A German lady to whom in palmer days my parents had let their house came to stay at Brighton. I was allowed to visit her. She must have had an understanding of the child mind. Within five minutes of my arrival she knew all about my book; within ten minutes I had fetched it from my overcoat pocket (I used to carry the precious manuscript about with me) and was reading it aloud to her.

The Birth of an Idea

I have just re-read it myself (for it still survives) and thus can realise the true greatness of her heroism. Not only did she listen politely to what must surely have been the most appalling jumble of half-baked and immature phrases ever put on paper, even by a boy of ten years old, but she actually asked me how much I would charge for a copy.

"I'll give you one," I replied, completely overwhelmed.

She would not hear of that, and in the end she ordered a copy, the price of which was to be sixpence.

It took me a week to write that copy out by hand, and even then I felt guilty about accepting the money. I realise now that my guilty feeling was justified. I ought to have paid the good Samaritan handsomely for her kindness. She gave me what I needed more than gold—she gave me confidence in myself. From first to last she never betrayed the fact that she was encouraging me, her attitude was that of some one who has discovered a work of art which she simply must possess for herself. Thus do good deeds, believed to be forgotten, live on.

The sixpence I invested in paper and ink and I settled down forthwith to the task of producing a steady stream of short stories. All rubbish, of course. But what did that matter? In my ignorance I was blissful.

I was still writing thus, aimlessly and in almost complete ignorance of grammar, plot, style, or even the meaning of many of the words I used, when my father learned of an opening for me as office boy in an auctioneer's office at Hove.

The commencing salary was half a crown a week, and I went to school for the last time just before my twelfth birthday.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

The master was caustic and just, if not exactly merciful.

"A bit of experience won't hurt you," he said. "In fact, when you realise how little you know you may learn something. But God help you if you ever take a job in which grammar or handwriting are necessary. You don't even understand the words."

Launched out in the world, I settled down to make the most of my opportunities. For perhaps a month, while the novelty lasted, I neglected my ambition to be a writer and thought only of keeping the stamp book correctly and copying letters in the old-fashioned press without smudging them.

It was in fact all marvellously interesting—the people I met, the occasions when I was left for a short time in charge of the office and amused myself by imagining some of the exciting adventures that might happen to me before anyone came back, the feel of a half-crown, earned by my own efforts, in my pocket.

But even such pleasant new sensations could not suppress for long the thrilling desire to put my thoughts on paper. Within two months I had spasms of panic. I began to realise the ease with which one's real ambitions could be crowded out by the pressure of everyday events. It was so painfully easy to take the line of least resistance—never to become a journalist at all, but instead to finish up as a chief clerk at £4 a week, like the lugubrious individual who filled that position in the office where I worked.

The prospect so frightened me that I remember taking stock of my position during long lonely walks on the South Downs around the Dyke and Wolstonbury Hill. I was spurred to action by the fact, which then

The Birth of an Idea

surprised me, that there was not a soul who seemed to mind whether I became an author or not, except myself. That is why, ever since those days, I have always advised every young man I know to listen attentively to other people's opinions, consider them carefully, but in the end to make up his own mind and keep to his own decision.

It was clear that, as I had to earn as much as possible for every week of my life, my literary efforts must be made in my spare time— evenings and week-ends. That time was my own, and thus I might be able with the passage of years to learn enough about the craft of writing actually to get paid for what I secretly regarded as the greatest fun in the world. It sounded too good to be true that people were paid for writing, but I was told that it really was so.

How to make the best use of that leisure time was a more difficult problem. I knew no one who had ever written anything for the Press except a school friend whose late father had written a book on the life of Nelson. The boy had shown me a cutting from a paper about the book, mentioning his father's name. It was the first book review I ever read in my life, and henceforth I regarded the son as the luckiest fellow alive.

I do not know whether any schools of journalism existed in those days, or whether one could obtain any practical text-books which revealed to the embryo Northcliffe the more obvious pitfalls of the craft. Probably something of the kind already existed, for the new popular journalism had already expanded into vigorous growth. But in any case, a weekly income of sixpence did not permit of such luxuries.

Treasuring my spare evenings as the only hope of

The Autobiography of a Journalist

escape from office life, I began the task of training myself as a journalist.

If there is anything in the theory of the survival of the fittest, its truth should be clearly demonstrated in Fleet Street.

Nothing but the intuition—how or why I do not know—that somehow, some day, I should become a journalist, kept me a hundred times from abandoning my self-appointed task in despair during the months and years that followed.

How should a penniless, uneducated, physically frail and deadly serious boy of twelve or thirteen, who knows no one in a position to help him, who cannot even use a typewriter or afford money for paper and stamps, set about the task of becoming a journalist?

If I were asked the question to-day it would be almost as difficult to answer as it was then. I was so utterly unfitted for this mad adventure, so certain, it seemed, to be disappointed. One thing kept me to my purpose—the sure belief that I was intended to write. I knew even then the joy of writing, even although everything I wrote went into the fire unread, uncriticised, unimproved.

This much I did. I read all the papers I could beg or borrow. I read every word printed in weekly papers like *Answers* and *Tit-Bits* which were regularly bought by members of the family.

I had not the wisdom—what beginner has?—to write about things which I had seen or experienced. At that time I had no news sense, and I should have been surprised if I had been told that anything I saw or experienced during my daily life was potentially worth 400 words in a newspaper or periodical. The

The Birth of an Idea

idea, for instance, that there was a possible article in "selling stamps by auction," which was one of the activities specialised in by the firm that employed me, might have opened up an entirely new avenue of approach in my efforts at self-tuition. But there was no one to tell me, and so I spent months writing execrable essays on the art of government, on the might of the Empire, on anything and everything about which I knew nothing. I suspect I wrote at least one article or short story around every utterly unsaleable idea in the world. Fortunately I destroyed the results without realising that they were valueless, so I was in no way discouraged.

There might even have been the germ of an article in the shifts to which I resorted in order to secure free paper on which to "practise." "Writing-paper for nothing," it might have been called. At first I used the reverse sides of surplus auction posters given to me by a managing clerk who thought I was mad. Later, when I was employed as a clerk in the office of a firm of wall-paper manufacturers, I cheerfully endured hard and uninteresting ledger work daily from 8.30 a.m. until 7.30 p.m. because of the many remnants of high-quality wall-paper which came my way, much of it beautifully smooth and, I found, ideally surfaced for writing on in ink.

Once I did submit an article, to what paper I have now forgotten. It came back, of course. And with it came the first printed rejection slip I had ever seen. That slip was more valuable than the cheque which it denied me, for it taught me something. I had no knowledge whatever of the routine of editorial offices. Like most beginners, I imagined that the editor and his staff sat around waiting eagerly for the arrival of

The Autobiography of a Journalist

manuscripts like mine, which were read at once and either rushed into print as a "find" (about once in a blue moon) or, more usually, came back to the author with a detailed explanation for his failure. That rejection slip was a cold business-like document. It did not suggest that the hand which folded it in my poor article wished to see any more like it. But it did give me a piece of information which I did not know before. It said that all manuscripts should be typewritten on one side of the paper only.

I examined that printed slip carefully for any indication as to why my article had not been accepted. Not a word was vouchsafed beyond the fact that it was "unsuitable." This was disappointing, because what I had really hoped for, when sending the article, was a word of guidance which might help me along the road. I had said as much in the letter which accompanied the article.

The letter remained unanswered, and I was left to struggle on almost as ignorant as I had been before. I have never forgotten that experience; that is one of the reasons why it is a rule, on the papers I control to-day, that any manuscript, however amateurish, which shows the slightest promise, is referred to either one of my assistant editors or myself, and returned with a specially dictated letter explaining why it is unsuitable, and giving any superficial hints possible for the guidance of the writer. But I must add that this policy is not merely altruistic. In this way I have discovered more than one writer who has since proved well worth the trouble taken over him. There are at least six established and comparatively well-known writers of popular fiction to-day who make a point of giving me the first refusal of every

The Birth of an Idea

word they write in recognition of the encouragement they received from my papers when they were in need of it. That is worth while. And so is the thought that here and there some struggling scribbler with the spark of the true journalistic fire within him may be shown a short cut, however slight, on the road to success.

Here I may refer to a colleague of mine who encouraged in this fashion a young girl who was trying to write serials. She showed signs of becoming a first-rate fiction writer, so my editor-friend was no philanthropist. But he took the trouble to point out her mistakes and nurse her over her period of immaturity. To-day that girl, now a woman, is one of the four women best-sellers in Great Britain. Her serials sell for prices running well into four figures. And until a few years ago that friendly editor had the refusal of all of them he wanted at half the price charged to anyone else.

I have said that my first rejection slip at least showed me that manuscripts must be typewritten. I profited by the information. At one of those evening classes which are invaluable to the ambitious poor I was taught how to manipulate a typewriter. Even at this task I proved too individualistic for my teachers. At the end of three months I achieved a speed as good as the average for the class, but I only used two fingers, one on each hand. In vain the instructor tried to teach me the correct fingering. It simply could not be done, for having discovered that I could get a letter down on paper accurately with two fingers, I concentrated upon improving my speed and lost all interest in theories. Whether my manipulation of a typewriter was "stylish" or not,

The Autobiography of a Journalist

to use his phrase, did not matter to me. All I wanted to learn was to type.

Soon afterwards my family left the neighbourhood of Brighton for mid-Sussex and I left with them. My job had to be sacrificed. Money was shorter than ever at home, so I overcame the temptation to utilise a period of unemployment in writing all day long, and began a series of personal visits to the local estate agents in search of work.

Luck was with me, for in less than a week I secured a post as junior clerk. This was the only period of my office career which really interested me.

The firm which engaged me was new to the district, in which two very much larger and older firms had long held a monopoly. These older firms conducted themselves with the pomp and dignity of family solicitors. They did not vulgarise themselves by advertising. They would not adopt new ideas. They would not recognise our existence. Consequently life in the quiet country town of Haywards Heath had its amusing side.

In my new job I was permitted occasionally to remain after office hours and use the typewriter, a great privilege which enabled me to prepare type-written copies of the rare literary efforts which I considered worth a penny stamp, plus another penny for a stamped addressed envelope for return if not suitable, another point of journalistic etiquette which I had learned from a paragraph printed in one of the weeklies I was always reading. Here, too, I was able to complete my knowledge of typewriting by constant work at a machine.

One day, shortly after taking up my new duties, I was, as usual, pondering new subjects for my pen

The Birth of an Idea

when it occurred to me that some of the duplicated copies of particulars of properties to be let or sold which were sent to applicants, were badly phrased, and lacked anything in the nature of originality. Here, surely, was a chance to put my writing ability, if I had any, to practical and immediate use.

That evening I went through the file containing these particulars and chose six, each describing a house which I personally knew and felt I could present in a more interesting light on paper.

A day or so later I showed the result to one of the partners. He agreed that my version was superior to that prepared by the senior clerk, and gave instructions that in future I was to inspect every property as it came on the books and prepare the particulars which were sent to prospective tenants or purchasers. Furthermore, he increased my salary from five to six shillings per week. A shilling a week rise, for writing in office hours. Verily the world was being good to me!

But the sequel to the first literary compositions of mine which ever in any form reached the public showed that my luck was better than I imagined. No doubt it was a coincidence, but the fact remained that the very first applicant to whom were sent the particulars I had written of a large property, bought the place a week later.

In those days people rented houses more frequently than they bought them. The owner-tenant boom had not begun. So the fact that this particular property, which had been offered for sale over two years, had at last found a purchaser, was a stroke of business which had no chance of being overlooked in a small firm. When the purchaser remarked to my

The Autobiography of a Journalist

employer that he had been instantly attracted to the house by the particulars which he had received, and which he had been pleased to find were perfectly truthful, I realised to the full both the power of the pen and the meaning of good luck.

Evidently my employer realised the power of the pen as well, for the next morning he called me into his office and presented me with a special bonus of 36s., representing 5 per cent of the commission earned by the sale. I had earned 36s. with my pen! Not from an editor, it is true. But nevertheless I had earned it. At that moment 36s. was a fortune. But even more than the money I cherished the encouragement which it represented. For the first time in my life I had evolved an idea, carried it out and reaped the reward of initiative. I invested a whole half-crown in typewriting paper on my way home that night, and another half-crown in penny stamps. I resolved to begin a great offensive against Fleet Street without delay.

For the next three months I increased the revenue accruing to His Majesty's Postmaster-General to the extent of at least sixpence per week without increasing my income by one halfpenny. All my laboriously written articles came faithfully home to roost. I remember some of them now. There was a long article on the future of the motor-car, another on the six most famous living men, another on women's votes.

They were all long articles, too long, for with the arrogance and garrulity of youth I turned up my nose at anything shorter than a thousand words. And they were all modelled upon the leaders in the daily papers. Poor editors! I should feel sorrier for them

The Birth of an Idea

than I do but for the fact that years in the editorial chair have since convinced me that almost certainly those early articles never reached the editor at all, but provided work for junior sub-editors, a most deserving class.

Topicality I had never heard of. If an abstruse problem such as the education of the South African native were mentioned by the Prime Minister in a speech, it seemed to me of sufficient importance to make a two-column article for *Answers*. It was years later before I learnt that the popular Press was interested only in those subjects which touched at some point the lives of their readers, and that when the subject was a technical one editors usually secured a contributor with an established name and specialised reputation to write it. How was I to know that one article of mine, dealing with the technical equipment of British railways, had no chance of acceptance because that field is covered by half a dozen experts who can write on every aspect of railway development with sure knowledge and absolute accuracy?

Then, as now, the recipe for writing articles that sell was to say something new, something which was of real interest to the coal miner, the engineer, the small shopkeeper—in short, the mass of ordinary people, and to say that something in as few words as possible.

“Make it brief” was the order of the day, and there was I, churning out essays filled with second-hand material. I was in a rut, but did not know it.

Another respect in which I was hopelessly ignorant was in discovering the most likely market for an article when I had written it—one of the most important factors of all for the free lance. Even if

The Autobiography of a Journalist

my articles had been of a far higher standard, they would still have remained unsold because I had no means of knowing which of the many papers for which I was trying to write was likely to suit or be interested by particular articles. I sent articles on impossible subjects to the popular weeklies, and equally unsuitable articles to papers like *Punch*, *Truth* and the shilling magazines. For I did not let the fact that I was too poor to purchase a shilling paper cramp my style—there was a kind bookstall clerk in the town who permitted me to refer to the various publications for their editorial addresses.

Remembering stories about famous men who had had to struggle hard for recognition, I was not altogether surprised by my lack of success. Nor for a time did I realise that this might be due as much to my ignorance of fitting the article to the market as to my style of writing, if it could be called style. The very fact that I wrote at all seemed to hold promise of great things to come. At least my fellow-clerks thought so, and treated me (or so I imagined) with a deference which was sadly lacking in other directions.

When another year had passed without any sign which even youthful optimism could interpret as progress, I began to realise that perhaps after all there was rather more in meeting the requirements of editors than was dreamt of in my philosophy. I resolved to concentrate for some weeks upon *Answers*, the paper which interested me personally more than any other. Week by week I analysed the articles and slowly it dawned upon me that a large percentage of the contributions dealt not with the matters of high politics which I had imagined would agitate the hearts and minds of *Answers* readers, but with short

The Birth of an Idea

articles and anecdotes which gave glimpses of little-known phases of everyday life and simple things.

There were, of course, longer articles on weightier subjects, but I noticed that when the paper dealt with national problems, the contribution was invariably signed by some well-known public man who, I assumed, would not have submitted the article on the off-chance of it proving acceptable. In a flash I realised one of my mistakes. I had been competing, or trying to, in a market in which the majority of articles were specially ordered from contributors whose names carried weight with readers, and who possessed expert knowledge of their subject. It was my first discovery of the commissioned article, and I did not know then that very many of those messages to the public by titled writers are the work of journalists who receive for their labour perhaps one-tenth of the amount paid to Lord This or Lady That for the use of his or her name.

Having arrived at these conclusions I reviewed my own limited range of experience to see whether anything had ever happened to me which could be made the subject of an article. I finally decided to prepare for *Answers* a short article dealing with a little "overtime" work at the office which yielded me a matter of two shillings extra pocket-money a month.

This consisted in putting up "To Let" and "To be Sold" boards in front of properties which came into the market, and the owners of which permitted the firm's board to be displayed.

The boards, of distinctive colouring, and dotted about the roads of Haywards Heath, were a valuable advertisement for the firm, and there was therefore keen competition between the local estate agents.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Part of my work consisted in canvassing the owners of vacant properties for instructions to find a tenant or purchaser, and to encourage me to secure permission for a board to be erected, my employers offered me twopence for each board I erected, and a penny for taking it down when a let or sale had been effected.

Here was an opportunity to obtain funds for postage and paper and I seized it with both hands. Armed with wire and a pair of pliers I would go round the neighbourhood two or three evenings a week, wheeling the boards on a bicycle. The first half-dozen fell down, or were blown down, within a week of being erected, and I saw that there was more in a simple matter like putting up a "To Let" board than met the eye.

I sought the advice of a man who put up boards for one of our competitors, as I could see he was an old hand at the game. For the price of a drink he kindly consented to betray his employer's important trade secrets and accompany me one night to demonstrate how a board could be erected so that nothing short of an earthquake or the human intervention of a jealous rival would uproot it.

I learned my lesson, and soon became quite expert in handling wire and pliers, the only tool I have ever been able to use.

Here then was a possible subject for an *Answers* article. I studied the matter carefully and there seemed to be no doubt about it. Everyone was familiar with "To Let" boards, yet probably few people knew how they got there, or how much was paid for erecting them. In short, here was the chance for a short article which would contain exclusive information about a little-known phase of everyday life.

The Birth of an Idea

I wrote four hundred words about erecting "To Let" boards, and sent it off. Being under the impression still that editors loved to reject things out of sheer spite, I put two more doubtful articles in the same envelope. And, with a flash of inspiration, I mentioned in the letter which accompanied them that being employed in an estate office I could vouch for the authenticity of the "To Let" article.

The first sign that my plan had worked was a letter signed by the editor, returning the two "decoy" articles, and intimating in two lines that he was using the third.

The following Saturday I walked three miles to buy a copy of *Answers*. I knew nothing about weekly papers going to press from ten days to three weeks before publication. Nor about the "stock" of articles always to be found in editorial offices. This file of material enables the right mixture to be supplied to each issue, but it also means in many cases articles being held for months.

When four weeks passed without my article appearing I gave way to blank despair. Obviously the article had been lost (I kept no copies in those days as I should have done). Or perhaps the paper was going bankrupt and using up stuff which had already been paid for. Followed two weeks during which I walked through the valley of despair and then the joyful day, just as I had finally abandoned hope, when I purchased my *Answers* and, opening it to page two, found facing me a half-column article headed "To Let."

I read it there and then in the shop. It had been completely re-written by some alien hand, but even when faced with this outrage to my pride, I realised

The Autobiography of a Journalist

that it was all the better for that. And it was undubitably my article. Simple facts discovered in quiet roads of a country town were at that moment being absorbed by a great army of people I had never seen all over the country. It was stupendous. It revealed to me for the first time the power of the Press and told me that I was dead right to make myself a journalist if it killed me.

I re-read that article every half-mile of the way home, and there displayed it proudly to the family. Faced with this evidence of my prowess, my family more or less grudgingly admitted that writing might be worth while provided that it cost only a few pence to try it, and that it did not interfere with more important work. But my father solemnly warned me against harbouring designs of ever becoming what he called a "professional journalist." I had never revealed my ambition, or the well-defined plans I had made years before, to anyone, and no doubt his advice was meant to be kindly. But for me, it was water off a duck's back. I had made a real beginning and nothing could shake my belief that sooner or later I should find myself in Fleet Street.

That belief was fortified by the arrival of my first cheque. I was paid 7s. 6d. for that article. It had taken me one evening to write. And there were seven evenings in a week, apart from all day on Sundays, and sometimes Saturday afternoons. Seven articles a week at 7s. 6d. a time. Two pounds twelve shillings and sixpence per week. Imagine how such a prospect appeared to a boy of sixteen earning 6s. a week, plus 2s. a month "board" money!

And only a sufficiency of ideas, and a sufficiency of markets separated me from over fifty shillings a week.

The Birth of an Idea

I had learned the trick. An article written in a tiny cottage in a lane miles from anywhere in mid-Sussex had seen the light of day in the pages of a periodical owned by Alfred Harmsworth, about whom even my father spoke with respect.

If I had ever had any doubts about becoming a journalist, that first article would have shattered them for all time. As it was it but reinforced my certain faith that the road ahead would in the end lead me, provided I nursed every opportunity like a miser nurses his gold, to the supreme symbol of power, fame, wealth, success, everything—the editorial chair.

My handwriting was improving as a result of all this industry, but not fast enough. I began to practise signing the words, “The Editor.” I meant to be absolutely ready when opportunity knocked at my door.

CHAPTER II

ADVERTISEMENT WRITING AS AN ADVENTURE

MY hopes of selling six articles a week at 7s. 6d. each were doomed to disappointment. Articles which seemed to me just as interesting as the one which had appeared in print were returned with unfailing regularity. It soon became clear that in journalism as in other matters one swallow does not make a summer.

Looking back upon that period of disillusion, I realise that those articles may not all have been as bad as results indicated. I did not know then how papers get overstocked with shorter material, how greatly topicality is prized, with the result that the trained free lance "on the spot" in London has usually covered any possible subject suggested by the day's news long before delivery of the article written by the amateur living in the country. I should have been surprised if anyone had told me that the weekly papers frequently left their shorter features until the very day of going to press and then rushed into print material written within an hour or so in order that it may be as "newsy" as possible.

I am speaking now of the national popular weeklies of the *Tit-Bits*, *Answers* and *Pearson's Weekly* type, which I conceived to be my market. Had I concentrated instead upon the provincial weeklies and the week-end magazine editions of provincial news-

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

papers a proportion at least of those articles which were thrown on the fire might have got into print. But the range of papers stocked by the local news-agent was small, and I had heard of no reference book which would give me the names, addresses and requirements of the many papers not sold in that Sussex town.

I might still have been trying in vain to repeat that first success had not an unexpected thing happened. An uncle who had migrated to the United States before I was born returned to England on a visit. I do not know what feelings the appearance of this uncle may have aroused in the minds of other members of my family, but to me it was as if a superman suddenly confronted a pygmy. For this uncle, whose existence had been made manifest to me only by the yearly letter which he wrote to his sister, my mother, at Christmas, had been one of the men who first invented national advertising campaigns in America. He had for some years handled every inch of advertising published by the Timothy Eaton Company of Canada, the Selfridge of that country. He knew every journalist worth knowing in Canada and a large number in the United States. And when, on his arrival, I learned he had actually owned newspapers and magazines—bought, edited and sold them, always at a profit—my delight knew no bounds.

My uncle knew nothing about conditions in England, but that did not worry me in the least. In his bag was a number of full-page advertisements which he had prepared himself, and the man who could rise to such heights would surely be able to help me to correct my mistakes and to discover the secret of success.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

The fact that I was the only member of the family who had ever written anything besides himself was sufficient to arouse his interest in me. If he was sceptical when I announced my intention of one day reaching Fleet Street, he at least hid his feelings nobly. In spite of my obvious ignorance, my lack of education, my crudeness, he was visibly impressed by my industry. "Success in the writing game—in any branch of it—is 75 per cent enthusiasm and 25 per cent brains," he told me. I remembered those words when, some years later, the first English editor I met told me exactly the same thing.

My uncle promptly placed me in his debt by turning our house into a paper-stall. Every time he went for a walk he returned with a big bundle of papers. When he went to London he would come back with a bag full of them. Plenty of the publications in which I wallowed joyfully during those magical four weeks I had never heard of before.

I was preparing a big campaign against these new markets when my uncle had a talk with me. He revealed the fact that my enthusiasm and appetite for writing had, unknown to me, impressed my family, and that my parents had discussed with him the possibility of my going to America.

The idea appealed to him and there and then he undertook to provide me with a junior sub-editor's post at Toronto on a Canadian weekly in which he had an interest. Moreover, he reinforced the suggestion with romantic stories about Edward Bok, who, landing at New York as a Dutch emigrant boy, eventually became the editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the greatest woman's paper in the world; about newspaper millionaires in New York

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

who had started as printers' messenger boys, and, with more modesty and less enthusiasm, about himself.

My uncle's own story was in many ways the most remarkable of them all, for when he was eighteen a Bilston doctor had advised his going abroad for his health. He went, and got work as a jack-of-all-trades with a country printer who ran a two-page weekly paper, a directory and did odd-job printing. From that beginning he had progressed, without making much money but meeting with adventure in great variety, until he was at one time the owner of four papers. Eventually he had restricted his newspaper interests to the investment of money and applied his own energies to advertising, because, he said, you could do the work in your own time.

To a boy who had never before received a helping hand from anyone the offer of a start in America under the experienced guidance of a relative who could be relied upon to carry out his promises was a great temptation. But I decided not to go. Two reasons influenced my decision. One was the knowledge that my mother, although she was willing to part with me if my heart were set upon it, was unhappy about the prospect. The other was an odd determination on my part that I would succeed at home. The thought of one day securing a post on the staff of a New York newspaper did not thrill me. The prospect of reaching Fleet Street did. I thanked my uncle sincerely for his offer, but said that having made up my mind to secure a living by writing for the English papers, I would not admit defeat until I had reached an age when defeat would be obvious.

He, wise man, kept his doubts to himself. Instead

The Autobiography of a Journalist

of pointing out the heavy odds against me, which he could easily have emphasised, he gave up hours of his time in the last week of his stay to "putting me wise" about the job before me.

Knowing little about English journalism, he yet knew enough to explain to me the probable reasons why some of my articles had come back with rejection slips. He explained to me the risk which any paper took, especially a paper with a large national circulation, by accepting articles containing facts which they could not check from unknown people for whose responsibility they could not vouch. He showed me that editors, in keeping as far as possible to writers whom they knew, were only playing for safety. In other words, that part of the would-be journalist's problem was to establish personal relations with his markets. Until he had got that far, the unknown writer would rarely be given the benefit of the doubt—and there is an unbelievable number of doubts in even elementary journalism.

Further, my uncle told me that one London daily paper at that time was receiving about three hundred short articles for consideration daily, and published five of them.

"On every subject of topical interest they receive at least one article either from an expert, or from one of their more or less regular contributors whom they know. So you can see what your chances are. Frankly, it's just a waste of stamps for you to send stuff to them."

I know now that the chances for the unknown writer were not quite as black as he painted them. Everyone has to begin, and every now and again a new-comer has an opportunity to follow up an initial

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

success. I have seen it happen too many times not to realise that every week new reputations are being made by those who have the flair to recognise a chance and to take it when they find it. But my uncle meant to be kind, and he helped me by shattering a whole regiment of illusions which had been responsible for waste of effort and postage stamps.

Having done that much, my uncle showed me how to learn to walk before I tried to run. Instead of swelling the sacks of manuscripts which daily poured into the well-known editorial offices, he urged me to seek an opening in less crowded avenues of the writing game. "When you send stuff to London you are only one—an unknown one—among thousands who are trying to earn a living by writing," he said. "Think of some idea which you can work on down here in Sussex, where you won't have to compete with trained London journalists. You will earn more money that way and get on quicker in the long run. You've got to reach the bread-and-butter stage first."

I knew of several reasons why pulling in my horns like that could not be done. For one thing, while writing short articles that did not sell and short stories that were destined for cremation unread might seem futile, there was a solid satisfaction in the knowledge that one was going through the traditional apprenticeship. I wanted to write books that would stir the public mind, to expose, as a special correspondent of a great newspaper, social evils which demanded a remedy. And while I realised that time must necessarily elapse before I could expect to reach the stage of achievement, nevertheless by aiming at the stars in the newspaper firmament, I had a comfortable feeling that I, too, was one of a glorious company.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

To turn my back upon all that, to admit that my chances of impressing London editors were negligible and to content myself with an effort to find some new market locally was tantamount to an admission of defeat. An admission which, with the arrogance of youth and the support of my great ambition, I was resolved to fight to the bitter end.

My protests became feebler as my uncle outlined his ideas. He may have known little about English papers, but he knew all about spare-time occupations and how to choose one with some possibility of development. He told me how his own right-hand man in Toronto had first contributed to a paper he owned when a telegraph clerk. Five years of part-time experience and the telegraph clerk found himself able to leave his blind-alley job and earn eight pounds a week on an editorial staff.

"Your problem is the same," explained my uncle. "Instead of trying to write articles for papers which don't want them, write advertisements for the shopkeepers around these parts. There is scope there. You may not be a genius, but you can give these local people points at copywriting. Get in touch with some of them, offer to prepare an advertisement which will increase sales for half a crown a time, and you will get business."

He expanded his theme. With no opposition, he pictured me first getting a monopoly throughout mid-Sussex and thus reaching the point when I should be able to give up my work in the estate office and becoming the first advertising agent in the district. His imagination carried him further than that. He saw me extending my business to Brighton, with offices in North Street—"near the Clock Tower."

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

I believe that in an excess of enthusiasm he traced the possibility of my making so much money out of this advertisement agency that I should be able to purchase a controlling interest in all the local newspapers and thus end my life in the highest state of bliss known to mankind—the state when one can order one's articles to be published unmoved by any editorial frown.

I allowed myself to be swayed by this eloquence. Truth to tell, the idea of becoming such a local celebrity compensated somewhat for the injury to my pride involved in abandoning the attempt to woo the London papers. When my uncle wrote a specimen set of advertisements, suitable for what he termed a "dry goods store," for me, and promised to send me a weekly batch of specimen advertisements from New York of the sort likely to keep me supplied with "selling ideas," I finally decided that I would find in advertising the romance and fame which for five whole years, right up to the age of nearly seventeen, had been denied me by the hard-hearted custodians of the national Press.

Hardly had I said good-bye to my uncle than I set about teaching mid-Sussex what modern advertising meant. The first moves in this new game were pleasant enough. They consisted of studying the local papers, making a list of all those firms whose announcements I decided, with the eye of the expert, did not conform to a twentieth-century standard of advertising. As most of the local advertisements were of the "Buy your meat at Brown's" order, I soon had a most encouraging list of possible clients. By assuming that one in four would employ me to write an original and snappy advertisement once a month, I reckoned on an income of at least four pounds a

The Autobiography of a Journalist

week. The memory of that simple example of arithmetic has since provided me with an excellent opening for an essay on "Counting your chickens before they are hatched."

I had abandoned at once my uncle's suggestion that I should begin slowly, and work up a connection by personal calls. For one thing it seemed to me that if I were to develop into a firm, the sooner the firm came into being the better. For another, and here at least I may point to a superior knowledge of the typical mind found in the English country town, I realised that most of the local tradesmen would refuse to believe that any boy of seventeen could teach them how to write advertisements or anything else. And in the founding of a "firm" I detected a safe and sure way out of that difficulty.

Just when all my plans were ready to put into operation, I replied to an advertisement inserted in the *Daily Telegraph* by a firm of estate agents at West Kensington who required an inventory and estate clerk and got the job at 22s. a week. This took me away from my possible clients, but not altogether, for with care, after paying 14s. a week for a bedroom, with board, close to Westbourne Grove at Bayswater, I was able to go home once every three weeks. And as I knew whom I wanted to approach I could conduct the business through the post.

In point of fact that move to London, while it lasted, fitted in with my plans very well, for it enabled me to boast a "London office." But to return to the first moves of the adventure.

For some reason now forgotten I decided to christen my firm "Lawbourne's." I gave a printing order for the most influential note-paper which I

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

could buy at 5s. per ream. This note-paper informed all and sundry that Lawbourne's was the first advertising agency in Sussex, with offices at Church Road, Burgess Hill (where my parents now lived) and Bayswater, London (where I rented the bedroom). I further embellished the note-paper with the following example of transatlantic verse, culled from one of the American papers left behind by my uncle :

“ Advertise, and the world is with you,
Don’t, and you’ll be alone ;
For the world to-day won’t pay a cent
For the great unknown.”

The note-paper also announced that the partners were “ P. P. Davey ” and myself. The Davey half of the firm did not exist except in my imagination, but I had decided to rely upon the profound wisdom, ripe age and experience of this “ stalking horse ” to offset the disadvantages of youth, knowing that in the English counties no one is deemed to reach years of discretion until he had laboured faithfully in some subordinate capacity for thirty years or so.

Working in my bedroom in London, and using my visits to Sussex at week-ends to make calls upon traders at times which to them were probably most inconvenient, I set out to become an advertising agent in earnest.

My first move was to prepare and issue a circular letter acquainting the world with the fact that Lawbourne’s existed and offering to place “ our ” services at the disposal of those favoured with a letter. That letter revealed how thoroughly I had assimilated the atmosphere of the packets of American advertisements which I was receiving from my uncle. I not only

The Autobiography of a Journalist

picked the brains of those unknown American copy-writers, but I adopted their phraseology much too thoroughly. I realise now how I overdid it. It seemed to me then, in my young enthusiasm, that the slow-thinking traders of those Sussex towns would be delighted when they were offered advertisements which were guaranteed to be "crisp and concise, short and sweet, and sure business-builders." Apparently most of them did not realise their urgent need of such aids to big business. At all events, the only order I booked for the first two months was given me by the local tobacconist from whom I bought papers. He permitted me to write an advertisement stating five reasons for purchasing tobacco and cigarettes from his shop. This he purchased for half a crown and used on the paper in which he wrapped ounces of shag for customers. To earn that half-crown I had to write the advertisement, get an estimate for printing five hundred copies on paper of suitable size and correct the proof. The tobacconist got his money back, for I told all my friends about this initial success and such of them as smoked pipes purchased tobacco at the shop in order to find out whether I really could write advertisements.

Other local shopkeepers did not reply to my letters and were too busy to see me on Saturday evenings, so I decided to extend my scope and, since I was now in London, try and get work from London firms. Once more I made the mistake of imagining that established organisations were waiting anxiously to give contracts to boys of seventeen without experience. After working all day, mostly on inventories in furnished houses and flats in the Kensington district, I returned to my back bedroom in Bayswater and

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

toiled far into the night writing letters to national advertisers whose products I thought I knew how to sell, and inviting them to let me explain matters "on any Saturday afternoon."

I remember writing to the distributors of the Heinz specialities kindly offering to undertake the whole of their European advertising for £5 a week! I remember also spending a joyous evening as the representative of Lawbourne's—the only advertising agency in Sussex—at an Advertising Exhibition held at the Holland Park Hall. I had some cards printed for the occasion, and reaped a rich reward, for I went home that night with my arms filled with literature, printing samples, books and other material forced upon me by people who sought the custom of this provincial firm. Their interest in Lawbourne's was flattering—I have a vivid recollection of one man, the London representative of a group of Polish newspapers, almost in tears because I would not definitely book space for my clients on the spot.

It was all very delightful, but I began to discover that, if writing for the Press was difficult, getting people interested in a proposal to write their advertisements for them was just as negative in its results.

One of the first difficulties I met with was the husband of my London landlady. He was an Irishman with a head for figures. And his knowledge of arithmetic told him unerringly that for anyone to pay 14s. per week for a bedroom and three meals a day, and then use the said room as an office and sit up burning his gas half the night was something which could not be tolerated. He made me a sporting offer to charge me an extra 5s. a week for the use of my bedroom as Lawbourne's London office, but I

The Autobiography of a Journalist

explained that 19s. out of a total income of 22s. a week was beyond my means, and agreed to find fresh quarters.

This was rather a blow, for I still had nearly a whole ream of paper left bearing the Bayswater address.

Eventually I took a furnished attic room in Edith Road, West Kensington, near the office where I was employed. This time I arranged to pay 7s. 6d. a week for the room and cater for myself.

Not so very long ago, before the rise of the newspaper millionaires transformed not only the Press, but the wages and conditions of journalists as well, it was generally assumed that every successful author or journalist starved in a garret at some period of his career.

With the move to the attic bedroom in West Kensington, I entered the period of my struggle for success which most nearly resembles the popular idea of Grub Street. But in my case it was not a matter of half-starving owing to the poor pay of that most precarious of all jobs—the “penny-a-liner.” It was due to a young man who undertook the task of feeding himself when he simply had not the time to spare from the all-important task of realising that vision of an advertising office, resplendent with thick carpets and carved oak desk.

For the next five months I worked from dawn until dusk, and then far into the night. I knew no one in London, and my work as an inventory clerk during the day did not bring me into touch with anyone who could shed any light upon the real difficulties before me. It follows that I had little temptation to slack. When I did not go home to

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

Sussex for the week-end I worked on Saturdays and until midday on Sunday and usually spent the afternoon walking from Kensington, past the Albert Memorial, along Piccadilly, and so, with the panorama of London unfolding before me, to Aldwych, where one might see offices of advertising agents who could afford what must surely have been the biggest brass-plates in London. Having walked up and down Kingsway three times and exhausted the delight of visualising what the word "Lawbourne's" would look like on one of those massive brass monuments to business success, I turned east again and walked down Fleet Street.

That was sheer delight. Although I had temporarily renounced my intention of becoming a journalist, I knew that if and when Lawbourne's extended their connection to London it would be necessary to have dealings with many of these newspapers and periodicals whose offices jostled one another along the most wonderful street in London. I learned by heart the address and position of every newspaper office in Fleet Street. On Sunday nights I would walk the five miles from my room in Kensington in order to enjoy the greatest thrill of all—seeing the papers pouring down the chutes into the vans, and then, a few minutes later, start off on their journey to the breakfast tables of the nation. I did not know what news they contained, but merely watching that hurry of loading, that saving of seconds, enabled me to feel that I had peeped into to-morrow before the rest of the world had finished with to-day. And over it all the smell of printers' ink, the stuff which, as Lord Northcliffe said, can never be got rid of when once it gets into your blood.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Looking back on those days, I see that although my mind was busy with magnificent schemes to transform British advertising, my heart was still true to journalism. If on one of my walks down Fleet Street, a journalist had stopped me and offered me a shilling a week to typewrite articles for him, I should have forgotten all about Lawbourne's in a flash and walked to Fleet Street every night for sheer love of being near to those mammoth machines whose steady hum penetrated through glass shutters weirdly illuminated by blue lights. Such is the power of Fleet Street over the souls of men and women who fall beneath its spell.

Meanwhile my domestic arrangements were not working as smoothly as I had hoped. When one's culinary utensils are limited to a single sixpenny aluminium saucepan and a gas-ring, the choice of menus is apt to be limited. And the fact that I had never cooked anything but an egg in my life added to my difficulties.

For nearly six months my diet consisted solely of tinned beef, tinned tomatoes, beetroot, eggs, cheese and bread and margarine, swilled down with tea. I like to think that in the last fifteen years the world has grown a kindlier place for the lonely, and that if any boy chose such a diet to-day, some good Samaritan would gently but firmly insist on salads, fresh fruit and cream being added.

Even I realised, after the first week or two, that my diet was limited, but with only about 6s. 6d. to spend on food, it was difficult to improve matters.

For six months I lived and worked eighteen hours a day on a diet which would have sent any dietetic expert purple in the face. The bread was white, the

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

margarine cost sixpence a pound and the milk was confined to tea. In short, the food value of the whole larder was sadly lacking, for three eggs a week was all I had of the one item which contributed very much nourishment to a hard-working and still-growing boy.

How long it would be possible to live on such a diet I do not know. Maybe an adult would find it adequate. One thing was sure enough—it was sadly inadequate for a seventeen-year-old boy.

At the end of six months I had lost most of the weight I had to lose, and was beginning to find it an effort to work even until midnight each night. Even my enthusiasm for advertising was waning, and although I tried to tell myself that this was due to the lack of encouragement which I had received—I must have written two hundred letters without repeating the success of the tobacconist's half-crown—a fear began to grow that perhaps after all I did not know quite as much about the food which the human body needs as I had thought.

The end of that experiment in malnutrition came in April 1914, after a week during which, in order to pay for my boots to be repaired, I had perforce to live mainly on broken biscuits at twopence a pound, bought in a street-market in the North End Road and eaten at lunch time, walking down side streets, with some water from a public fountain to wash down the repast.

I had never been able to allow myself more than fourpence-halfpenny three times a week for lunch. Those were "fancy lunches." On the other three days I had been accustomed to secure a lunch for twopence by doing what I called the "broken-biscuit trick." That wasn't so bad, although I envied those

The Autobiography of a Journalist

who had the price of a cup of coffee in their pockets—biscuits and water are such dry fare. And I envied still more the other clerks in the estate office who could afford to buy a newspaper every morning, a luxury beyond my means.

A whole week of broken biscuits must have finally shattered my nerve. At all events, going home that Saturday night, I found myself replying to my mother's anxious demands to know why I looked so ill not by asserting that all was well, as usual, but by revealing for the first time the full story of how I had been feeding myself, a fact which I had carefully hidden from my family.

The result was a hurried visit to the doctor, who frowned heavily, said "foolish" several times and ordered me a list of foods calculated, from its length, to supply my half-starved body with twice the nourishment it had missed. I returned to London on the Monday with a bag packed with these ingredients for "slops," which I loathed, and with instructions to give notice at the office where I was employed forthwith. I was further supplied with an extra ten shillings in order that I might have funds enough to purchase a proper lunch and evening meal at a tea-shop. Thus unromantically, and thanks to my family, was I saved from early disaster. When I hear stout and comfortable fathers advocating letting young men rough it, and read their letters on the subject in the Press, I wonder what good can possibly come from exposing anyone, during the vital years of growth, to such harsh conditions. I have met too many men whose physique has been ruined for life—so ruined that when they had won success all the money in the world could not give them back their health—not to

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

feel a surge of anger at the inhumanity of such a philosophy.

My gloom at going home under these conditions was deepened by the knowledge that during more than half a year in London I had really made no progress with my advertising proposition. I decided that this was probably due to my absence from Sussex, which I should have made my real "hunting ground," and to my old mistake of flying too high. Henceforth, I resolved, I would try to develop exactly on the lines laid down by my uncle—always assuming that I could find another job in Burgess Hill or Haywards Heath.

With my return to Sussex my luck changed. Within a few days I was offered, and accepted, a position with the local firm on whose staff I had been before going to London. I was to manage a branch office at Burgess Hill, and to receive a salary of 15s. a week. That sum in the country, with no bus fares, and the possibility of going home to lunch every day, was worth 30s. a week in London. And better still, my weekly journeys on a bicycle collecting rents in the various villages, and canvassing vacant properties would enable me to follow up letters from Lawbourne's with a personal call.

By way of a start I prepared some booklets calculated to interest possible clients in my own firm, and showed these to my employer. He, being young enough to appreciate the need to adopt new methods of advertising if he was to attract business away from his more conservative and more deeply entrenched rivals, adopted several of my suggestions and henceforth I became an unofficial advertising agent in addition to my other duties.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Some of the bright ideas which I carried out during the next few weeks were quite successful and great was my disgust when one of the professional bodies governing the profession objected to them. Apparently auctioneers and surveyors were not permitted to advertise, upon pain of having their professional degrees withdrawn. To me, filled with renewed enthusiasm now that I was getting into print again, a good business-building scheme was worth all the degrees upon earth, but my employer was not so sure, and after several skirmishes, all due to my "notions" being reported by jealous rivals, several of my brighter ideas had to be abandoned.

I did, however, prepare a booklet dealing with the various services which our firm offered to the public, and containing an imposing list of the properties and businesses let and sold through our agency during the previous twelve months. This also contained an article on mid-Sussex as a residential centre, which I had originally written as an essay and submitted to a correspondence college which offered to judge attempts from outside students upon payment of threepence. The essay, which was really an article of eight hundred words, came back marked in red ink "Very good" and given ninety-nine marks out of a possible hundred. If it was as good as that, I thought, it might as well be used to interest people who were considering the district as a residential centre.

The booklet was enclosed with every letter sent out, and brought up-to-date by a fresh-printing monthly. After the first month I prepared a scheme for paying the printing bill by including in it advertisements secured from representative traders. My

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

employer agreeing, I proceeded to canvass the leading firms of the town, having previously arranged that we would carry a maximum of six pages of advertising at a price of £5 for three months.

That was the easiest advertising proposition I ever handled. The traders concerned were accustomed to look to us for details of new people coming into the district, and were not slow to realise the advantage of getting their names into the hands of new-comers before their rivals could arrive on the scene. And if the price asked were high, as it was, well, they had a lively sense of past favours which had put business their way, and a promise of similar favours to come. In one morning—in less than two hours, in fact—I returned to the office with six pages of advertising firmly booked up for the first three months.

Shortly after this success, we set the district talking by booking the first whole front page advertisement which the local paper had ever carried, and filling it with a single column of type centred in the page, which repeated the list of properties let and sold which appeared in the booklet. The rest of the page, representing £8 10s. worth of space (the whole page cost us £10), was left blank.

Had Selfridges announced their intention of opening a mammoth store in Sussex, the news would not have created more interest than did that page advertisement. After that and sundry other "stunts" people forgot that we had been in their midst for four years, against two firms "established over a century," and we began to reap the harvest.

There is one advertisement open to any man in rural England. That is a seat on the local council. In due season my employer felt the urge to serve the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

public in this way. Encouragement was not wanting, for most of the local councillors had grown old without renewing their ideas, and new blood was needed. So it happened that I had the opportunity to apply my slowly developing ideas and an appetite whetted by small successes to the great problem of planning an election campaign.

Those three weeks during which the election was "fought," if one can call it fighting when your opponents do precisely nothing except write a letter to the local Press inviting the electors to return them, were sheer undiluted joy. My employer in order to succeed had to oust any one of three councillors of long standing and local repute. So secure were they that when it became known that there was to be opposition from the youngest auctioneer in the district they did not even trouble to depart from their customary policy of masterly inactivity. A letter, half appeal, half command, to the local residents, had always been enough to ensure their election, and they were not going to be rattled by a jumped-up youngster with ideas too great for his years (it being agreed in Sussex that anyone under forty is a youngster).

Our plans were more ambitious. In the first place we booked a whole page in the issue of the local paper which appeared the day before the poll. We next sought out the local billposter and secured from him the sole right to display election posters on his hoardings. As he controlled all the hoardings for ten miles around that meant that our rivals could not put up posters if they wanted to, except upon private property.

Next we enrolled and instructed a corps of over

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

forty canvassers, who proceeded to call upon every voter in the place. Canvassing up to that time had been unknown, and we soon had the whole town talking about the enterprise of our candidate.

Meanwhile the candidate himself engaged in a speaking tour, addressing four and five meetings each evening. And an election address, in addition to being published double column width in the local paper, was sent through the post to every voter.

It may be said that this campaign was much ado about nothing. But there was more at stake than a seat on the local council. So far as the candidate himself was concerned, a defeat would have been a heavy blow to his prestige. His rivals would have laughed openly, and ridicule is a powerful weapon in a small community. And so far as I was concerned, success would give me confidence, which I needed. If I could organise a successful appeal to the town, then I should not feel so shy when asking local traders to let me handle their advertising. Psychologically, at all events, this election meant a lot to the two people principally concerned.

Polling day came, and the candidate broke all the rules of the game by continuing his exertions right up to the last moment. The result was triumph. My employer was elected at the head of the poll, displacing a former chairman of the council who had sat on it for thirty-four years, and incidentally securing the heaviest vote ever recorded in the town. Such is the power of modern advertising, handled by people who could, as I modestly thought, claim to have had some ideas on the subject.

The election out of the way, I settled down again in pursuit of success for myself. There were two

The Autobiography of a Journalist

courses open to me. I could offer to write advertisements for local shopkeepers at half a crown or so per advertisement, or I could offer to write them for nothing provided I was allowed to book the space with the local papers, and thus secure the usual 10 per cent agent's commission.

The latter method offered the greater possibilities of quick progress, for it savoured of "something for nothing," but it had the disadvantage of taking business out of the hands of the representative of the principal local paper, who looked to these orders for space for part of his income. This man I had known for some years, and as he was a good fellow, I hesitated to make such a direct attack upon his preserves.

Eventually I compromised by trying out both methods. In the case of the bigger traders and stores I offered them sets of advertisements at a price, and when trying to gain the interest of smaller fry I offered to take my payment by booking space for them.

It was here that my foresight in placing the name of the mythical P. P. Davey on my note-paper proved useful. One of the first firms upon whom I called was a large general store at Hurstpierpoint. Having obtained an interview with the proprietor in his private office behind the main shop, I shyly and falteringly elaborated the advantages of filling the space which they took regularly in the local paper with copy prepared by experts. My heart almost ceased to beat while he read through the six advertisements which I had taken along as a sample series. They were based upon a series which my uncle had prepared for Timothy Eaton's and occupied full pages

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

in the Canadian papers, so I knew they were better than anything sleepy Hurstpierpoint had ever seen before. But whether the country trader facing me would realise that fact was another matter.

Having read them through three times he looked at me from under a pair of bushy eyebrows. I could read his thoughts. He was thinking "They look good to me, but what can this slip of a boy know about advertising, anyway?"

"Did you write these?" he asked suddenly.

Modestly I disclaimed the ability to write such little gems. They had been prepared, I explained, by my partner, Mr. Davey, who was engaged at the London office of Lawbourne's all the week, and who only came down to confer with me about the Sussex end of the business, which we regarded as a sideline, on Sundays.

I do not know whether he believed me. I fancy he did not. At all events, he pointed out that the advertisements were not quite right as they stood, but that if my partner would revise them on the lines of one or two suggestions which he wrote down, he would then consider paying fifteen shillings for the set.

I returned home and spent that week-end altering the advertisements. The following Tuesday afternoon I was back in his shop.

"I have discussed the matter fully with Mr. Davey," I said, "and he agrees that your suggestions are a great improvement. He is very busy just now on a big contract for a new soup cube for which he is contemplating a campaign in Sussex, but he managed to find time to go over this set of advertisements, and here they are. I hope you will agree

The Autobiography of a Journalist

that they will attract considerable business to your store."

That convinced him. That, and the advertisements from which lingering traces of Canada had been eliminated. He readily agreed that such advertisements had never before appeared in the local paper, and indeed it was true. For never before had any tin-pot shopkeeper in a country town been able to benefit, had he but known it, by the use of copy prepared by the advertising director of one of the greatest stores in the world.

It was a situation rich with humour, but I was not conscious of anything funny. My elation was solely due to the fact that I left the shop with fifteen shillings in my pocket—fifteen shillings, I told myself, I had earned by my own initiative—and with the prospect of selling another series of advertisements on the same terms in six weeks' time. Nor was my elation any less when, the following Tuesday morning, I bought the local paper and found, in a prominent position on the main advertisement page, the first genuine Lawbourne advertisement ever to appear in the British Press.

There were only four shops in the district that could be dignified by the name of store, and in the next few weeks I was writing advertisements for three of them. The fourth, the largest store of all, which local rumour credited with mysterious London connections, did not reply to a letter I wrote asking for an appointment, and I lacked the courage necessary to call after that rebuff.

These larger "contracts," with occasional announcements written for smaller traders, and commission from space booked in the local paper, were bringing

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

me in very nearly ten shillings a week, or more than half what I was earning by a week's work as the "manager" of a local estate office. After fruitless years, or what seemed like fruitless years to me, I might be pardoned for believing that I was now on the road to success.

I looked around for something which would consolidate my position, and at the same time advertise my existence. Already more than one small order had come to me through Lawbourne advertisements being talked about among local traders, who are quick to imitate if their rivals get hold of anything new. My weekly advertisement for the Hurstpierpoint firm still managed to be original, despite the fact that I had now used up all the suitable copy left behind by my uncle. I was finding my feet. The mystery of coining the snappy phrase, the use of "white," the packing of a telling message into a small space, the art of arousing public interest—I was slowly gaining a solid knowledge of all these things, profiting as I went on by my many mistakes.

But a big scheme which would break fresh ground was undoubtedly needed. And at that moment my uncle happened to send over to me an American "trader's magazine," one of those publications of a type better known on the other side of the Atlantic than here, which consists of a "Who's Who" of traders and merchants in a particular district, written up with due regard to their dignity and local patriotism. The idea, I gathered, was to make a charge for each person or firm written up in its pages, the revenue thus obtained to enable a guaranteed number of copies to be distributed among local residents free of charge, with something over as profit.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Here was something which the local newspapers had not thought of. I dwelt on the possibilities of preparing and issuing a "Lawbourne's Who's Who in mid-Sussex" and I had convinced myself that the district would never realise its great opportunities as a residential and business centre until a publication of this sort had awakened local patriotism, and told the whole glorious story of local achievement. For I had already decided to improve upon the American publication, which was nothing but a glorified catalogue of personalities, by devoting the opening pages of the Lawbourne publication to a long special article on mid-Sussex, its industries, commerce, attractions and future, and part of that article was, indeed, written within a week of the arrival of the American paper which gave birth to the idea.

The first step towards carrying out this new idea in practice should have been to secure estimates for the printing and the blocks that would be required, for the reproduction of views of mid-Sussex and photographs of well-known local residents and of all traders who booked space was part of the scheme. Had I obtained these estimates, I should probably have discovered that to produce the high-class production I had in mind, printed on "art" paper, with half-tone blocks throughout and with a two-colour cover, would have necessitated charging too high a rate for space for anyone ever to be able to get anything approaching a representative selection of local shopkeepers and professional men into its pages. Or if I had discussed it with the editor of the local paper I should have been told at once that the idea was too American to appeal to the unenterprising people around me. Lord Northcliffe might have thought

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

"Lawbourne's Who's Who in mid-Sussex" worth while, but the local butcher's opinion was more problematical.

Ignoring all these considerations, intent only upon what I regarded as a good idea, and knowing nothing about printing costs or how block-making runs away with money, I planned my "Who's Who" to be thirty-two large pages, and devised a schedule of advertising rates for the publication which, if prepared with a total disregard of every single factor of production, I judged was low enough to attract the people I was after.

A half-page, the biggest space any single firm or man could book, was to cost 10s. 6d. The smallest space was to be a quarter column, without portrait, costing 2s. 6d.

The next week-end I set out to begin my canvass. That day I did not book a single order, nor did I have any better luck during evenings the following week. Fortunately it was July, and I was able to call upon a dozen firms an evening. The result was always the same. The shopkeeper would listen politely, look over the American publication which I took along as a sample, and then explain that either he did not wish to talk about himself, that he had no money to spend on advertising, or that he wished he had never seen mid-Sussex and he certainly believed that for business the London suburbs were better. From first to last I could trace not the slightest spirit of local patriotism. Perhaps I was unlucky. I might have fared better in Lancashire or the north of England, where I believe the rivalry between one town and another is something real. In Sussex it certainly seemed that no one cared very much about the future of the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

district—certainly no one cared to the extent of 10s. 6d. per column.

After canvassing a whole village without getting a single order I began to have my doubts. So I changed my tactics, and spent a week visiting the firms to whom I had sold advertisements in the past, and for several of whom I was now, as Lawbourne's, working regularly.

These good folk discussed the idea with greater freedom. I presented it as a great scheme propounded by the mythical Mr. Davey and, remembering those advertisements from the same source which were talked about, they at least considered the scheme. But they turned it down in the end just the same.

The storekeeper at Hurstpierpoint, to whom I had sold that first series of advertisements, expressed the prevailing opinion in a nutshell. "Folks in America may have to do such things to get anyone to take any notice of them. Over here we prefer to let honesty speak for itself. I would go out of business rather than publish a lot of stuff about myself which is nobody's business but my own. All that matters to the public is that I sell goods at a fair price." And that was that.

Still, I was loath to abandon the idea, and made one more attempt. This time I approached a number of tradesmen with whom I had had dealings connected with my duties as an auctioneer's clerk.

One of them was a country baker, whose shop occupied an outlandish spot at Scayncs Hill, a good five miles from where I was living. One fine evening I walked over to see him, and was rewarded with an order for a quarter column, for which he paid 2s. 6d. in cash. I urged him to make it half a column for

5s., when it would be possible to include his photograph as well, but he panicked at the idea of having his photograph printed, and as I was uncertain about its effect upon other clients—for he was a countryman of uncivilised appearance—I did not press the point.

That was the one and only order that I ever got for "Lawbourne's Who's Who of mid-Sussex." For another fortnight I struggled on, only to meet with disappointment, and, from the more friendly people to whom I explained the scheme, well-meant advice to drop it.

It was obvious at last that mid-Sussex did not want the story of its achievements to be given to the world, and so I at last admitted defeat. There remained only one last rite to perform in order to wind up the whole thing—once more I walked ten miles to Scaynes Hill and back, in order to return to my friend the baker his half-crown.

I was still secretly smarting over this defeat, and even debating the possibility of writing to my uncle and emigrating to Canada after all, when I received a letter from the largest stores in the district, which had hitherto ignored my existence, stating that they were interested in the advertisements appearing in the local papers which they were informed Lawbourne's had written, and would I call and see them with reference to an advertising scheme which might interest me.

When I mention that this firm was the nearest approach to a real store in Sussex, outside the seaside towns, the reader will understand with what trepidation I presented myself armed with Lawbourne's card, on the day named in their letter.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

The managing director did not ask me any questions about either Mr. Davey or my youth. I suspect that before writing to me he had made some enquiries from the editor of the local paper. At all events he came straight to the point. The firm was contemplating the idea of issuing an eight-page house magazine once a month, devoted to sales-talk about new goods, and to help attract attention to their stores generally. Was I prepared to edit it for them? And in addition prepare their Press publicity, which appeared weekly in about five local papers circulating in Sussex?

The glorious thing about youth is the ease with which it can shake off the memory of defeats. Within five minutes of entering that store I had forgotten all about "Lawbourne's Who's Who" and was engrossed in the new prospect opened up. What ideas I advanced on the spur of the moment I do not know. But I imagined at that time that I knew a thing or two about appealing to the local people, and perhaps I did. At all events I left an hour later, having secured the job of preparing that monthly circular, and writing all their Press advertisements, for a fee of £3 a month. There was a condition attaching to the arrangement—I was not to write advertisements for any other stores so long as I was working for them. But that condition was the measure of my local reputation. The biggest firm desired that my services should be exclusive, so far as store advertising was concerned, to them. And as under the arrangement my income from advertising would be around £4 a month from all sources, or exactly what I was earning by working in an office for six days a week, I agreed to that joyfully. This work was, indeed, the first real recognition I had so far received, and it

Advertisement Writing as an Adventure

proved to me as nothing else could have done that I really was progressing. The office at Brighton and the monopoly of advertising in Sussex did not seem so very far away that evening.

I was given a week in which to prepare a "dummy," or outline, of my suggestion for the first number of the house circular. I prepared this that very night, and prepared another each evening of the week. For I was determined that, having engaged me, that firm should have a monthly advertisement which would be absolutely original.

I did nor know how to prepare a real "dummy," as such things are known in Fleet Street—a specimen issue of the publication with blocks cut from other publications pasted up in position to give a rough idea of how the pages will look, and all headings and main items printed in by hand. Such thoroughness was unknown to me.

Instead I took eight foolscap sheets of paper, and devoted each one to a "selling point" or to some novel scheme concerned with the sort of goods the firm sold. By the end of the week I had prepared fifty specimen ideas for the firm to choose from. Some of them meant selling goods at a cut price, others concerned pure stunts. They were all, I thought, worth considering.

Having made my own selection, and jotted down the contents of each page of the first issue as I intended to prepare it if left alone, I went to see the managing director. He accepted all my ideas—even congratulated me upon them. The first issue, he said, could hardly be improved, for the time had come when they felt that old-fashioned methods would no longer suffice. He kept the rough notes to show to his

The Autobiography of a Journalist

fellow-directors and promised to return them to me, with full instructions regarding the date by which they wanted the first issue ready for local house-to-house distribution, within the next day or so.

I was then seventeen, and had reached the point when business men discussed ideas with me as though I were ten years older. Surely after this start, after all the spade-work which I had so confidently undertaken, it would be possible to make some progress now? I saw myself slowly extending my connection, perhaps in the end undertaking national advertising contracts for some of those London firms which had not had the courtesy to reply to letters written from my attic bedroom at Kensington earlier in the year. I gave one longing thought to my earlier aspirations to reach Fleet Street, and then settled down to plan the next step. For already it was a fixed belief of mine that in order to succeed, a man must always see where he is going two steps ahead. Then he does not flounder through the lack of a plan. The individual who knows what he wants to do, and keeps right on trying to do it, will usually achieve his ambition in the end.

So I saw myself drawing "bread and butter" money from that contract with the local stores, and proceeded to plan my next move. I even ventured, for the first time, to work out at what point I should be safe in throwing up my work at the estate office, and in making advertisement-writing a full-time occupation.

My next move, I decided, was to introduce "reader ads." or write-ups of local firms, into the local paper. The plan had failed as a separate publication, but if I could co-operate with the local editor, who knew

everyone, then it might succeed. The London dailies were already doing it, and I knew that I could make a local dairyman's business, for example, sound far more interesting in a special article than anyone at present believed possible.

I should have heard from my friend, the managing director, on the following Friday. On that day he sent me a letter saying that the matter was held up for a week, but he thought it would be settled by then. And so it was. For the date of that following Friday was August 7th, 1914. Two days after he wrote to me Germany invaded Belgium, and the world, including mid-Sussex, realised with a sense of shock that this war talk in the newspapers had not been mere bluff after all.

That first issue of my house circular has not appeared yet. On the date when it should have been pushed through local letter-boxes the only advertising in sight was the huge posters on the hoardings which read "Your King and Country Need You—Join To-day." The wives who should have been attracted to the stores by my business-building schemes were wondering when their men of the Sussex Yeomanry and the Royal Sussex Regiment would be back again. And even the ten shillings a week which I had been earning had dried up completely.

I had been so sure I could see two moves ahead. Actually every idea I had was in the melting-pot.

CHAPTER III

HOW I LEARNED JOURNALISM

THERE can have been few people whose belief in the importance of themselves was not shattered, or at least badly shaken, by the events of August 1914. Until then I had fondly imagined, with the egotism of youth, that the question of my success or failure was of some importance to society generally, that the development of one more brilliant novelist or famous journalist or the raising of the standard of advertising enriched the nation as well as the individual.

With the outbreak of war I made the discovery that, apart from a doubtful interest on the part of my family, no one was really interested in whether I succeeded or whether I was forced to live all my days as an estate agent's clerk. No doubt my more sophisticated acquaintances thought to themselves I must have been a fool ever to imagine anything else. Yet the fact must be recorded that up to August 1914 I did believe, quite sincerely, that as my future was of such vital importance to myself, occupying my entire mental horizon, it must also be of a certain importance to all the inhabitants of the village where I lived, to all those whose lives would be enriched by my success, and to those whom my success as a writer would affect. It is easy to be an egotist at seventeen.

How I Learned Journalism

With the coming of the war I knew beyond doubt that we are all isolated atoms and that our enjoyment of life—even for the most successful—is governed by our capacity to enjoy it ourselves. Other people are too busy looking after their own lives to worry much about others. I checked off this discovery by making a list of tradesmen who had failed since I had been in the district. Decent fellows, many of them. And they had disappeared without anyone thinking twice about them. It was my first glimpse of the heartlessness of individualism.

I reviewed my own life up to date, realising that I must be the sole architect of my career—that I might get help here and there, but could not depend upon it. In short, the coming of war had washed out all known landmarks, stirred my mental processes and provided me with a breathing space during which I could prepare to make the most of the opportunities which would come when it was ended. The possibility of my being killed never entered into my calculations. There was so much that I wanted to do that a premature end to my ambitions was unthinkable. Happy belief in a benevolent faith, which chased away for me the worst nightmares which afflicted other and cleverer people at that time. The doubts which that simple faith saved me are some justification for the exalted ego. I state the facts faithfully without attempting to excuse my arrogance.

Thinking over my own puny efforts against the background of the war, I came to the conclusion finally and irrevocably that advertising was not exciting enough. I decided I possessed a “news sense,” and an appetite for handling the raw material of papers, which helping village stores to sell

The Autobiography of a Journalist

special "lines" of goods did not satisfy. It became abundantly clear to me that I wanted to write about murders, super-crooks, bombs and the whole galaxy of events which seemed to me to make up history.

During the next twelve months I had ample leisure to make new plans to this end. I volunteered for the R.A.M.C. on the day war was declared, partly, I remember, because I did not believe combatant service could be right and partly because I had dabbled with First Aid for some years as a hobby. After going before three overworked doctors at a Brighton depot I was rejected. Apparently the months of overwork and underfeeding in London had impaired my physique too thoroughly for the Army to have any use for what was left. Nor did repeated overhaulings during the next four years reverse that verdict further than to give me a C3 label and work in Whitehall, where I had the doubtful pleasure of releasing an A1 man for service overseas, and the still more doubtful pleasure of helping to audit accounts totalling £37,000,000 per annum. But that phase in my journey to Fleet Street comes a little later in my story.

For the next year I continued my duties as the "manager" of a branch office, the business of which had all but disappeared with the outbreak of war. What was left probably averaged one caller a week. The first two days of each week I was occupied in collecting rents over a wide area stretching from Brighton to East Grinstead, and, filled with my resolution to make one more attempt to enter journalism, I looked around for some task with which to occupy my time during the remaining four days. After considering various schemes, I decided to

How I Learned Journalism

write a great diary of the Sussex men in the Great War.

Having settled down to the work, I spent ten months in cutting out and filing every reference to the Sussex battalions which appeared in the local papers, and such national newspapers as I could borrow. The work imposed a heavy drain upon my purse, for although one could write a war diary on the backs of disused auction posters, there was no means of cutting out all references to the Sussex men which appeared each week in the *Mid-Sussex Times*, the *Sussex Express*, the *West Sussex Gazette* and other papers, except by buying them. Such was my local patriotism at that time that I incurred a paper bill of five shillings a month in order to collect material.

My method was to write a chapter a month, each chapter dealing with events connected with war effort, so far as they were then known, both in Sussex itself and overseas, of two months before. When I had completed the first chapter I found that it totalled 15,000 words, and gave what I considered a detailed picture of the mobilisation of the county for war in August 1914. Assuming that the war lasted for one year, the estimate then most generally accepted by everyone in Great Britain except Lord Kitchener, I decided that my great war diary when completed would go nicely into three volumes. It was a comforting thought that while everyone else seemed exclusively preoccupied with the task of helping to win the war, or entertaining the men of "Kitchener's Army" encamped on the Downs outside Brighton, there was one young man quietly performing the task of chronicling local history for posterity's benefit.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

By the middle of 1915 I had written just over 80,000 words of that war history, and although unaccustomed to concentrating for so long upon one subject, and a little tired, was still sticking grimly to my self-appointed task.

How long the complete record might have been by the time 1919 dawned, and whether it was masterpiece or muck, will never be known. For in June 1915 I got the chance of a clerical appointment under the War Office in the Audit Office of the Eastern Command, and, thoroughly tired of vegetating in the country when so many exciting things were happening in London, I joyfully accepted the post as a chance of helping more directly in the national effort.

I looked around the little estate office which had been in my care without any special regret, and certainly untouched by the knowledge that with the change a new chapter was very definitely opening in my life. I thought that my work in London would be completed with the coming of peace in a few months, and that then I should return to Sussex and take up the work of entering journalism where I had left off. For how many of us can recognise at the time the really significant moments when great changes are about to happen in our lives? You go out for a walk and turn to the right instead of the left—and the whole course of your life is changed. You write a letter and forget to post it, and success or failure is involved.

I went to London in 1915 to work for a few months checking Army store accounts, and then to return to Sussex. My employer asked me to continue to suggest ideas for Press advertising to him while I was away, and promised to reinstate me upon my return.

How I Learned Journalism

I never returned. In 1929 I am still in London. The accounts which I checked with such futile care—for nobody worried about a thousand pounds more or less during the war—have probably been destroyed long ago. Yet the decision to go to Whitehall still influences my life. Indeed, it made my present life possible. It was the turning-point. Happy ignorance! If I had known as much then I should have been more scared than I was.

Before leaving the country I had to decide whether to continue my war diary or not. I re-read the 80,000 words which I had written and decided with a rare spasm of modesty that others could perform the task better than an untrained boy of eighteen. So I spent one wet evening burning the fruits of twelve months' work—the first effort at anything longer than 1000 words which I had attempted. That first act of modesty which I had ever performed was a mistake. Not very long afterwards, while the memory of what I had written was comparatively fresh in my mind, I began to doubt whether my great war diary had been as bad a thing as I thought when I burnt it. Now I realise quite clearly that it wasn't. I wish very much that fate could restore those odd bits of auction posters to me, and that I had gone on with the job. Had I done so, my native county might have been the first to possess a detailed record of her war achievements. In case any reader of this book ever undertakes a similar task in secret, my advice to him is this: Nothing which you are trying to do, which has not been attempted before, should be destroyed until you have satisfied yourself that it is hopeless. During that wet night, in my attic "study" at Burgess Hill, I may have destroyed a

The Autobiography of a Journalist

valuable document. I certainly had compiled a mass of information which few other people, and possibly no one at all, possessed.

My humble frame of mind lasted for several weeks. I had written probably half a million words, and sold four hundred! The rest had gone the way of millions of manuscripts perpetrated by hopeful—and hopeless—amateurs every year. I had begun to realise what the amateur is apt to overlook, that in attempting to write for the humblest paper or periodical in Fleet Street, one is competing with trained and experienced writers, and that without a natural gift for journalism, or exclusive information not open to others, it is liable to be mighty uphill work.

Despite these doleful reflections, however, I once more began to write several articles a week. Some I sent out, only to get them back. Mostly I wrote for the sake of practice. For I was rather pleased to find that the habit of writing in the evenings and at week-ends had become part of me. In actual fact, though I did not realise it, I was experiencing what Mr. H. G. Wells has called the "continuous urge"—evidence of a flair for journalism which to-day I look for in beginners, and which is so often a pointer to ultimate achievement.

Arriving in London I presented myself at Cecil Chambers, Strand, then the head-quarters of the Local Auditor of the Eastern Command, and was duly enrolled as a temporary Civil Servant.

The work, I discovered, was comparatively simple, and the amount of it one was expected to get through in a day involved no great strain. My immediate colleagues, too, were the most entertaining people I had met anywhere. One had come over with the

How I Learned Journalism

first Canadians and been invalidated out of the Army. Another was an experienced traveller nearing sixty, who knew the interior of Africa much better than he knew the way from Gower Street to the Strand, and who spoke about once a day, always to curse the fate which had caused him to come home on holiday a month before the war prevented him from getting back. He had applied for leave to join the South African force beginning operations against German South-West Africa, and, his age being discovered, had been relegated to clerical work for his pains.

Apart from these two and myself, my immediate neighbours were all regular Civil Servants, good fellows in their way, but sadly lacking in originality. Indeed, I discovered that from the highest official to the lowest among the "regulars" any departure from routine was regarded with dismay, suspicion and sometimes horror.

The atmosphere of that office damped my spirits just as much as the London outside filled me with wonder. I feared that in the course of time, if I did not escape somehow, the lack of enterprise and the throttling of originality might get into my blood, and leave me unfitted for journalism, and bereft of those masses of ideas which had for years tumbled over each other in my immature mind. Perhaps it was merely that I was scared of becoming as dull as the people around me.

To escape this fate, I began to introduce a fresh note into such official letters as I had to write (they were called Minutes). For a week or two nobody realised what I was doing, but the official mind awoke to the fact that there was a heretic in their midst when the Finance Branch of the War Office received

The Autobiography of a Journalist

one fine morning a massive batch of accounts concerning a motor omnibus which had been lost in London, and the topmost "Minute" of the two hundred odd attached to which read simply "From Local Auditor, Eastern Command to F5, H.A.T.? "

Mystic signs on that Minute revealed the fact that I had written it, and so the irate voice which demanded an explanation over the telephone was put on to me. Gently I explained that no explanation was needed. "H.A.T." obviously meant "How about this?" and saved further labour in preparing a long report upon a matter which had already cost as much in clerical labour as the missing bus was worth.

In acid tones I was informed that the cost of clerical assistance in such a matter was a thing which concerned only the Financial Secretary to the Secretary of State for War, and did not come within the province of a temporary assistant on an audit staff. And further that precedent existed for the form which such a letter should have taken, such precedent not to be departed from without the consent of the Army Council.

I replied quite frankly that I knew all that, but as an opportunity to save time had occurred to me, I had naturally taken it. I further hinted that had the person who dealt with the account in F5 department been wide awake, the cost of a telephone call might have been saved.

The voice rang off abruptly at this point in my effort to reform the Civil Service, and I settled down to work very faithfully according to the rules of red tape while I waited for the bump.

I was not left long in suspense. Early the following morning the Local Auditor sent for me. I had seen

How I Learned Journalism

him once only—when joining his staff—and I knew that he rarely dealt with staff matters except in cases of promotion or dismissal. I had given up all hopes of being promoted for my originality, and went along the corridor to his room with what courage I could muster to receive my dismissal.

He did not look as fierce and outraged as I had feared. And when he asked me how I was getting on, his voice was kindly.

I told him frankly that the work was as interesting as figures could be, but that the atmosphere of a Government Department was rather monotonous.

"I thought it might be," he said, still kindly. "That was why I sent for you. I am arranging for an outside section to be stationed for audit purposes at the Mechanical Transport Depot of the Army Service Corps at Short's Gardens, Drury Lane, and there is a vacancy on it. It will be under the direction of a man who, like yourself, is unaccustomed to a Government Office. Until a fortnight ago, in fact, he was the news editor of a London newspaper. He wanted to do some useful war work, and came along here. He will need three assistants, and the two selected are also volunteers. Would you like to go as the third, or would you prefer to stay here at headquarters?"

A job away from the atmosphere of red tape, and alongside a real journalist! Joyfully I seized the chance offered to me.

The Local Auditor was a fair man. "I must warn you, of course, that an outside staff is sometimes apt to be overlooked. You may not get promotion so easily."

Promotion. I might have told him that I would

The Autobiography of a Journalist

not have exchanged that opportunity of working in the company of a news editor for the chance to be the Secretary of State for War himself.

"I will take my chance of promotion," I replied.
"And thank you for giving me the opportunity."

He rang a bell, and his secretary ushered in a brisk little man who, in my imagination at all events, had Fleet Street written all over him.

"Mr. B.," said the Local Auditor, "here is your third assistant."

He introduced us, informed me that from that minute I was to take my instructions from the new chief, and with a few words of hope that we should be able to extract some interest out of our work, the interview ended.

As I turned to go my eye caught sight of a bulky bundle of accounts on the corner of the desk. It seemed vaguely familiar. Then I noticed that on top was a long "Minute" bearing the stamp of F5 department at the War Office. I suddenly remembered my attempt to reform the Civil Service, and the expectation of dismissal which my meeting with a professional journalist had driven out of my head.

The Local Auditor had not even referred to that "crime." He was evidently a judge of men, for all his thirty years in Whitehall, and had guessed at the impatience which had been responsible for that incident. Gratitude towards a man who possessed not only a sense of fairness, but also a sense of humour, tempers to this day my instinctive dislike of what may be called the Civil Service mind.

Outside the Local Auditor's room, I turned to my new section chief.

How I Learned Journalism

"When shall I report?" I asked, addressing him with trepidation not because he was my chief, but because he was a journalist—because those eyes had looked upon secrets which I hoped one day to know.

"What about coming out for a cup of coffee?" he replied. "At present I'm on strike because they expect us to work in this weather"—it was a cold October day—"without any heat. In a store piled with cold steel, too. Apparently there's some regulation about not allowing naked lights in case of fire. Made by the Army Council sitting in a nicely heated room. Well, I've told the storekeeper that he can either get the regulation amended, or say good-bye to all hopes of getting his accounts audited this side of next summer. Regulations are, of course, important, but not so important as it is that I shouldn't catch cold. We will have some coffee and then stroll up and see what the Army Council has done about it."

From that first moment I knew I had escaped all the way from Whitehall to Fleet Street. This man regarded red tape just as I regarded it. Did that mean that I had the mind of a typical journalist? My mind refused to register all that this meeting with a journalist might mean to me. What it did register was a determination to make the most of my chance. I resolved to work harder than ever before, not with any thought of promotion—I would have refused it cheerfully had it come, for that would have meant separating from my new chief—but to make quite sure that I gathered into my mind every scrap of advice I could glean from him. For remember that right up to that moment I had never spoken to a single person, with the exception of my

The Autobiography of a Journalist

uncle, who could answer the simplest question about papers or the craft of journalism.

The Local Auditor had imagined he was sending me out on a new job. I was determined to prove that he was the fairy godfather who provided me with my first lesson in journalism.

The first lesson began simultaneously with the arrival of two cups of coffee in a teashop. Apparently my section chief had been told that I had ambitions of becoming a writer (this much I had confessed to the Auditor at my first interview with him, when the question of a permanent post in the Civil Service had been suggested) and he asked me whether I had ever tried to write an article.

My answer to that question was to pour out the story of those years spent struggling along without guidance or reward. I told him frankly how ill-equipped I was for the adventure and of the paradoxical urge which let me be happy only when I was trying my hand at writing. And I told him, in outline, the story which you have already read.

I realised, of course, that Englishmen should not pour out their hearts to strangers like this. But from the very first moment I saw him, he seemed more a friend than a stranger. Perhaps there is, after all, some freemasonry of the spirit which unites even news editors and amateurs in the great writing game. Moreover, I sensed from the moment I met him that here was some one who would neither laugh nor discourage me, but who would understand, because at some time he had known the same urge himself.

When I had finished, which was just when he was filling his pipe for the fifth time, Mr. B. said, quite casually, "I don't see any reason why you shouldn't

How I Learned Journalism

be a journalist. We'll see what can be done. At the moment we must win this damned war first."

That was all, but it left me dazed with joy. If he had enthused, I might have thought that he was trying to encourage me. But he didn't. He contented himself with one observation and then dismissed the matter as settled.

Later I was to learn that this man was the very incarnation of the Fleet Street mind—the sort of hardened journalist to whom all the world is news, worth more space or less, and who, in the words of an editor who had worked with him, could be relied upon, in the event of some great celestial upheaval, to stroll into the news room with unruffled calm, take his pipe from his mouth and say: "Well, boys, the sky has just fallen in. Shall we make it a 'splash' or keep it down to a column?"

I do not think the news, told me by a second journalist on our little staff, that Mr. B. had been an assistant-editor under Lord Northcliffe and an editor under Mr. Hulton, increased in any way my admiration for him. The mere fact that he was a journalist, who actually knew the men who were like gods to me—the men whose names appeared in the papers and whose divergent styles I had feebly tried to copy—exhausted all the admiration of which I was capable. Further acquaintance, and the discovery that in addition to his work at Short's Gardens, Mr. B. still wrote occasionally for the papers, and that his articles were always printed as a matter of course, was merely gilding a lily which to me was already wonderful enough.

Looking back upon the two and a half years which followed, my memories of the work which we were

The Autobiography of a Journalist

doing, often under pressure, and in difficult surroundings, are overshadowed by the wonder of conversations during which my chief would bring Fleet Street to life for me; by days when two and even three journalists whose names I frequently saw in the newspapers would call at our little office in the great Army Depot to take my chief out to lunch, and regale me with the latest stories from Fleet Street while they waited for him.

From my earliest years anything connected with the Press had aroused in me much the feeling which other men feel when they hear their old school, or their regiment, mentioned in conversation. Without having reached it, I knew Fleet Street as part of my mental make-up, so that I felt an air of proprietorship about its papers which was probably as definite as that assumed by the great newspaper proprietors themselves.

During those war years I lived in much closer proximity to Fleet Street than does even the most experienced provincial journalist, and I made the most of my opportunity. For always at the back of my mind was the knowledge that somehow I must turn this very unorthodox apprenticeship to account.

The first discovery which penetrated my consciousness was that I had bungled things hopelessly. Talking to my chief, listening to those other journalists who made our room a meeting-place, I began to understand for the first time what is meant by a "nose for news." These men had seized the possibilities of a news story, dealt with it and forgotten it before, back in Sussex, I should have begun to write an article of the sort I had been churning out for years. I realised, too, that these men did not just re-hash old

How I Learned Journalism

facts so much as go out into the world and get fresh information. They sought news that was new. So much should be obvious to the veriest tyro in journalism, but the number of beginners who still send me articles by the dozen which contain nothing but a repetition of facts from old newspapers—devoid of any original treatment—show how widespread is this ignorance of the first requirement of modern journalism.

Profiting by the atmosphere of journalism around me, I devoted every moment of my leisure time to writing articles. It was easier to do this than formerly. For one thing I really believed I was making progress, and for another no money was required—all the papers were so attenuated in size owing to shortage of paper that the amount of material required to fill them left very little scope for the amateur.

I therefore concentrated on the sort of article which would be topical, popular and therefore eminently saleable when normal conditions once more returned.

After several months during which I was a listener during the day and a writer in the evenings I wrote an article in the best *John Bull* manner about something or other which seemed to me to be quite as good as the articles appearing in that weekly paper. The following day I was lunching with my chief after spending the morning at an outlying depot, and he asked me whether I was still trying to write. For answer I timidly produced the article, and explained that it was the best of about sixty written and destroyed since joining his staff.

As I watched him reading it through, pausing now and again to light his pipe, I passed through the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

whole gamut of emotion from excessive hope to black despair.

"What made you choose this subject?" he asked at length.

I explained that it was both topical and popular, and that I imagined it would be read with interest.

"Why do you think it is topical?"

"I saw a paragraph about it in a paper only yesterday," I answered, "and it occurred to me that this point of view had not been stated."

He looked at his watch. "We've just ten minutes—now listen."

Would any school of journalism have been able to teach me as much as I learnt during that next ten minutes? I doubt it. He explained that my article was not topical—that what meant topicality to one paper did not mean it to another and that in any case just as one swallow did not make a summer, one paragraph appearing in a newspaper certainly did not make a subject topical for the popular weeklies.

Nor did he agree that the article was popular. On this point he quoted the saying of a newspaper peer, which, by the way, is still the guiding editorial principle of one of our greatest daily papers. "If there is a fire in London and £100,000 worth of goods are destroyed, it is worth two lines," said the magnate.

"But if there is a fire in which a fireman rescues a kitten at the risk of his life, then it's a top" (a "top" means a top of the column news story). In the first story there is no human touch. In the second there is. And the public prefers a human story in its newspapers to all others.

Further, my chief explained that my article consisted mainly of my own opinions, rather than of

How I Learned Journalism

facts. Why, he asked, should any paper having a wealth of talent at its command, publish the opinion of an unknown amateur upon the subject? If it were of sufficient importance, as I had imagined, to deal with at all, any paper would prefer to give their readers the opinion of some one who could speak with authority.

Having made it quite clear that I had been wrong in choice of subject and treatment, he became more encouraging. The article was apparently good in places. I remember that he picked out one or two phrases in particular as refreshingly original touches.

"You show originality in one line, and spoil it in the next," he then pointed out. "Listen to this—'Twenty-four long hours'—what length were they then? A hundred and twenty minutes each? My dear lad, an hour is exactly sixty minutes and neither you nor anyone else can make it any longer. So what do you mean by 'Long hours'? Loose writing. Muddled thoughts. You have ideas and you don't know how to use them."

There and then, on the backs of envelopes pulled out of his pocket, he re-wrote the article to show me how it should have been done. When I hear people declare that they do not believe in luck I think of that extended lunch hour when a man who had been up to three months before the night news editor of a national daily, with a large staff of experienced men under his control, devoted the best part of an hour to sweeping away some of the ignorance displayed by an under-educated country boy precocious enough to think that he could make himself into a journalist.

Having engaged his interest, I began a golden period

The Autobiography of a Journalist

during which, at odd moments, he taught me the A B C of the writing game. Once a week he would suggest a subject for an article and leave me to write it. Then he would criticise the result in a manner which left me with no illusions about my skill.

It was drastic treatment and might have shattered my ambition but for two things. The desire to be a journalist had too long been ingrained in me for any discouragement to deter me. And working with journalists—in the end we had four on our staff apart from the chief, and the people at head-quarters openly called us eccentric—I found myself admiring more and more the keen, alert, penetrating minds of these men accustomed to weigh up any story, and maintain a sense of proportion about any “crisis.”

I thought then, and I still believe, that the journalist who enjoys his life gets far more out of it than any man living. Is he not at the very fountain-head of history? And what thrill can the world provide to compare with sitting down after the eleven o’clock edition is just on the machines and reading the news that the rest of the world must wait for until breakfast-time the following day?

My one aim, during that time, was to progress far enough before the coming of peace scattered our little staff to be able to find some job in a newspaper office. Any job, I did not mind what, if only it would enable me to live and learn. I confessed as much to my chief, and he laughed at my determination.

“Of course you’ve got to be a journalist now,” he replied. “I’ve told so many people that I’m making you a genius that any failure now would destroy my prestige for ever.”

He was joking—Fleet Street is rarely serious in its

How I Learned Journalism

spare time. If any news editor allowed himself to be depressed by the mass of suicides, divorces, shattered homes, court cases and "hard luck" tales which form so large a proportion of his raw material every day of his life, he would soon lose his reason. So they joke about life and hide their emotions beneath a frivolous exterior.

The other literary men on our staff—one the editor of a thriving magazine, another a novelist noted for his perfect style, another the serial editor of a great daily—all helped me in the spirit of good comradeship which at that time pervaded the whole nation.

I remember the day when the novelist re-wrote an article for me, and inexperienced as I was, even to me the beauty which he managed to put into an article of half the length I had written was an object-lesson in the writing of English.

Gradually I found myself becoming surer in my judgment over the choice of a subject and the method of treatment. I went back over such of my articles as I had been specially proud of, and therefore kept, and in nearly every instance found that obviously there was nothing in them to be proud of at all. I had of course been wasting paper and ink for years over articles which were quite unsaleable, and which anyone with any experience would have known instantly were quite unsaleable. This difficulty of judging ideas, and then fitting them to the right markets, and writing them in the right manner and at the right length to appeal to those markets, is the very science of free-lance writing for the Press. When you have learned that lesson thoroughly you are very near to success.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

In other words, it is possible to be a born journalist, and (in the absence of guidance) a born fool at journalism at one and the same time.

Two and a half years after I began working with him my chief gave the first sign that he considered my writing had reached publication standard. Tuition crowded into odd moments—frequently weeks went by without the subject being mentioned—meant slow progress. At last came the day for which I had been living since beginning my first novel at the age of eight.

My chief was preparing to go out to lunch, when he suddenly paused, as though inspiration had come to him.

"I'm just going along to see a friend who has got a paper," he said. "If you are not lunching with anyone, put on your hat and come along. He might be useful to you."

I went. I expect readers will smile when I confess that I followed my chief up the stairs leading to the editorial offices of a small woman's weekly paper more afraid and bashful than I had ever been before in my life. At last, after years of effort, I was going to meet one of those minds that direct papers, that choose between this manuscript and that, upon whose shoulders rest the greatest adventure of all—the circulation of a paper.

I found myself shaking hands with a brisk young man of about thirty-five. He was seated at a large desk completely submerged in a sea of manuscripts. On the other side of the room was a table two feet deep in papers and periodicals. More papers were strewn about the floor. That room could only have been an editorial sanctum, or the room occupied by

How I Learned Journalism

a lunatic with a craze for hoarding the printed and typewritten word.

"This is the lad I was telling you about," said my chief. "Any time you've got an idea you want written up you might try him. He's a glutton for work and writes no more tosh than most boys of his age."

The editor had a kindly face and proceeded to put me at my ease by showing me some pages of make-up for his next number and asking me what I thought of them. Then he asked me what I wanted to write, and I remembered answering clumsily : "Anything. I just want to be a journalist."

He considered that reply. Presently he said : "There's a child actress on at the Vaudeville. And she speaks three languages in the course of the show. Not so bad for a child of ten. I want some one to go and see her, and write up a signed article of about eight hundred words. Would you like to do it ? "

I would cheerfully have interviewed a mad bull for that chance and said so. The editor smiled. "Keep your enthusiasm," he said, "it's 75 per cent of success in this game."

"Well, here's her name," he added, writing on a slip of paper. "The best time to get her is between acts. Better 'phone for an appointment or she will keep you hanging about all night. Eight hundred words. Copy by Tuesday next. And get two photographs—one as she is and one from the show. Is that all clear ? If so, B., we must lunch. I've got a first appointment this afternoon at two-thirty."

Thus was I pitchforked into journalism. And thus did I secure my first commission from a London editor without having had any previous experience in the provinces, that breeding-ground of journalism.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

If I had realised I was actually going to be given the chance of doing something, my nervousness before the interview would have left me speechless. As it was I was out in the street again and making my way to the usual teashop before I realised that I was at last being given the chance to write something definitely for publication.

It had all happened, I realised, because of the kindly interest of my chief. His influence had got me so far, and I was consumed by a desire not to let him down. I believe that most beginners show the same tendency that I did to belittle their own prowess. Certainly, it seemed obvious to me then that the article, if I ever managed to send it in, would have to be re-written to be made suitable for publication.

Having secured an appointment with the young actress, I presented myself at the theatre the following Friday evening. The child protégée received me with her mother, who seemed rather taken aback to find that the special representative of a famous publishing firm was, in spite of the camouflage of a dark moustache, obviously not more than double the age of the protégée herself.

I felt horribly shy, and would gladly have fled in the opposite direction as I was taken to the dressing-room, but no doubt my journalistic instinct enabled me to keep outwardly calm. I reminded myself how ardently I had longed for a chance like this when struggling along in the country. I had not reached this modest point in my career by way of cushioned ease, and my own sense told me that I could afford to throw away no chances.

That interview must have had its humorous side, for the mother was obviously used to such occasions,

How I Learned Journalism

while I—the interviewer—wasn't. However, I managed to get down a number of notes about the child's career, and about her part in the new play. I questioned her as to how she began. And the mother suggested that I could "work these notes up in the usual way and put her name to them." It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest that my way might not be the usual way and to suggest sending them a copy of what I wrote, but it occurred to me that such an admission would give me away, and I refrained.

Leaving the theatre I dashed back to Kensington, where I was now living with my people, and spent the next four hours, until two o'clock in the morning, getting my article down on paper. I wrote that eight hundred words in four different styles before I slept, lest in the act of resting the authentic "atmosphere" which I wanted to convey should escape me.

The next day, Saturday, I left the office at four (we worked late and long during war-time) and spent a further eight hours polishing up the version of the article which I had picked out as the most promising. In common with most inexperienced writers, I imagined then that the longer you fussed over an article or story the better it became. Now I know that such things are a matter of temperament. Some writers can revise their work a second and third time with advantage, others will find that they either say what they want to say in the way they want to say it at the first attempt or it escapes them altogether. I am one of the latter—if an article or short story does not strike the right note as originally written, I prefer to destroy it and write an entirely fresh one. The only short story I ever "polished" and worried over until it seemed to me to be nearly a work of art

The Autobiography of a Journalist

was also the only complete story of mine which never sold. If you have the true journalistic "flair," then intuition and originality may be sacrificed by too much revision of your work. At least I think so, and many of the most capable journalists in Fleet Street have expressed agreement with that view.

At last the article was posted and I settled down to wait for the verdict. When a week passed without any acknowledgment I began to fear the worst. Here let me add that I shared an illusion common to many outside contributors—that editors sit at their desks waiting eagerly for fresh contributions which they read the moment they arrive. In practice the editor's day is usually occupied entirely with interviews, work on the current issue, conferences with his superiors and questions of high policy. The reading of manuscripts is the one job which he can put off until the week-end, when they can be considered in the comparative peace of his own home without interruptions. The free-lance who receives a decision on a manuscript within a fortnight has no reason to complain, and every reason to be grateful for a well-organised editorial office.

At that time, however, I did not even realise that a weekly paper such as the one in which my article was to appear went to press three weeks before publication. Nor did I know that when an article has been supplied by order no news is emphatically good news, for few editors trouble to write in such circumstances unless there is need for revision, or some other query connected with the work sent in.

By the end of the second week without news I was certain that I had failed too horribly for the kind-hearted editor to be able to break the news. I longed

How I Learned Journalism

to ask my chief what I should do, but did not dare to. In short, I was thoroughly miserable at the thought that I had evidently let down two people who had tried to help me.

Another week passed, and at the end of it I plucked up sufficient courage to go to see the editor. On my way along the Strand I saw the paper concerned on sale at a street-seller's pitch, and out of a sense of gratitude towards the paper which had given me my first chance I bought a copy.

Idly I turned over the pages as I walked along. I stopped. And the world about me ceased to exist. For there, complete with two photographs, was my article—in print. It was astounding. I turned into a teashop and over a cup of coffee I made a further amazing discovery. The article had been printed exactly as I had written it. I was able to check that fact because I had a copy of the article in my pocket.

Still I was unsatisfied. I wanted to hear the editor's verdict about that article from his own lips. I went on to his office and found him working late.

"Have you seen your article?" he asked cheerily as he shook hands.

"Just," I replied; "was it what you wanted?"

The fruits of years of hard, misdirected toil hung upon his reply, but you would never have guessed the fact—probably he didn't—from the casual way in which he answered.

"Very good article," he said. "I'm giving you twenty-five shillings for it."

That was the greatest evening of my life. Now my journalistic future was assured. I had "arrived."

For this success was very different to that far-off

The Autobiography of a Journalist

article written for *Answers*. Then I had chosen my subject. This time I had been ordered to write on a given subject like any other journalist and, like any capable journalist, although I had to secure facts from other people and mould them into the desired pattern, I had delivered the goods. If I could do that once I could do it again—and again—until I did it sufficiently often to earn a living out of it. The whole wonderful prospect of Fleet Street was opening to me like a vision about to be fulfilled.

That evening I celebrated my success by dining at a teashop on two sausages and mash. I was alone but glad of it, for there was much to think about. And I had a new and strange commission in my pocket that was worth thinking over.

When, greatly daring, I asked the editor whether there was anything else I could write for his paper, he replied: "I want a series of thousand-word articles discussing Twilight Sleep method of child-birth from all angles—for and against. It means interviewing doctors, and visiting nursing homes. Do you think you can tackle it?"

It was a strange mission to offer to a boy who had just passed his twenty-first birthday, but I did not stop to enquire why I had been chosen, when other writers with expert qualifications for such a task appeared in the very issue of the paper at which I had been looking. I just took the chance which the gods sent me with gratitude and asked no questions.

The editor had given me the addresses of several doctors especially interested in this method of child-birth, and also of two Twilight Sleep Homes, the matrons of which were to be interviewed. And he had given me a book recently published on the subject

How I Learned Journalism

and an odd article taken, I remember, from *The Quiver Magazine*.

I dipped into the book over my sausage-and-mash, at peace with all the world. One commission successfully accomplished and another in my pocket. Success after so long. What did it matter if the road to Fleet Street was by way of two Twilight Sleep Nursing Homes? And that I was shy, and only twenty-one?

CHAPTER IV

FLEET STREET AT LAST

YOUR born journalist is prepared to write a column upon any subject on earth at short notice. This does not mean, as those who sneer at the popular Press seem to imagine, that a journalist thinks he knows all about everything, but rather that the trained journalist is in touch with so many people that whether the subject on which he is asked to write concerns diplomacy, medicine, crime or fashion, he knows exactly where to obtain the most up-to-date information on the subject. Upon this ability to hunt up facts quickly and accurately depends, to a very large extent, the size of the income enjoyed by the free-lance journalist, and the value of the staff-man to his editor.

But at this time, faced with the prospect of writing six articles dealing with Twilight Sleep, I realised that among my circle of acquaintances there was none in a position to help me. I had the addresses given me by the editor, it is true, but I wanted to get my first article from some one I could question—some one who could give me a sort of outline of the prospects for the whole series.

I mentioned the difficulty to my chief, whom I had told of my good fortune.

"Why not begin by having a talk with your own doctor?" he suggested.

Fleet Street at Last

I pointed out that my doctor was an old man, and, I thought, very conservative. He was not likely to be in favour of any new doctrine.

"What does that matter?" was the reply. "You have to secure articles both for and against. The harder he slates it the better for your article against the method. Go and see him. Get him to tell you all he knows, then you won't be so afraid to ask questions when you get to the nursing homes."

I went. It was as I expected. For half an hour the old doctor, who had spent a lifetime assisting children to enter the world via the Fulham slums, poured scorn upon the "neurotic women who were not content to accept Nature as it is, and who must try to meddle with it." After listening to him I began to think it strange that the Government did not instantly pass legislation prohibiting Twilight Sleep altogether. But I had been good journalist enough to get down my notes in a sort of semi-shorthand which I had developed for myself, and when I read them over I realised I had enough material for the first article, with plenty to spare.

The following Saturday afternoon I visited one of the nursing homes. When I reached the address outside London and saw an imposing mansion standing in its own grounds I would have fled if I had not remembered that in my pocket was a card informing all and sundry that I represented a weekly paper. I remembered, too, that my road to Fleet Street lay through that imposing gateway.

Mustering my courage, I marched up to the front door and asked for the doctor, saying I had an appointment. He received me in a room smelling strongly of ether and carbolic, of which the walls were

The Autobiography of a Journalist

covered with anatomical charts which made me feel sick.

During the next five minutes I discovered that it was possible for two equally honest and worthy men to hold diametrically opposite opinions upon one and the same subject. My own doctor had condemned this new method of assisting children as being diabolical, unnatural for the mother and definitely harmful to the child. This man, who was helping forty babies a week into the world, was so enthusiastic about Twilight Sleep that he did not notice my youth. He saw in me only the chance to propagate his ideas in a paper read by women, and he made the most of the opportunity.

For an hour he talked solidly of Twilight Sleep. One by one he answered, unasked, the criticisms contained in my other article. He told me that children born in this way were, if anything, brighter than ordinary children. That mothers were saved from hours of exhausting pain. That to prevent any mother from taking advantage of this great discovery was as "wicked" as to insist on operating without chloroform.

He gave me a lecture which would have filled any hall, so comprehensive was his knowledge of his pet subject, so perfect the elocution and the imagery. As I was a journalist, he treated me as one to whom it was vital, absolutely vital, for the good of his life-work, to send away convinced.

At the end of his discourse I plucked up my courage and asked a question.

"And you are sure that your mothers suffer no real pain compared with the ordinary confinement?" I enquired.

Fleet Street at Last

For answer he took me by the arm. "Come and ask them yourself," he said, "I don't want you to take my word for it."

Hot and fearful, I was hurried along passages until I found myself in a long room containing eight or ten beds, in each of which lay a mother and a baby.

I had never seen ten babies at once before and longed for the floor to open and swallow me up. There was no escape. Having paused at the entrance to the ward to speak to the nurse in charge and make sure that I could be admitted, he paraded me from bed to bed, asking each occupant to give me their own views upon the new method. Most of them had had children before, and declared firmly in favour of the new method. *Twilight Sleep*, it seemed, was what the women of the world had been awaiting for centuries.

As I left the ward, I noticed a smile on more than one face. But I did not mind then, I had got my article. What did it matter if my shyness had revealed itself so plainly?

For a fortnight, during every moment of my leisure time, I lived in an atmosphere of babies, delving into strange matters which normally do not interest a young man of twenty. I visited more homes, and more mothers in their own homes. I inspected "*Twilight Sleep*" children who had grown to school age and were quite normal—evidence, I was told, that the drug did not affect the children any more than chloroform would have done. I walked into impressive consulting-rooms in Harley Street and talked to specialists who told me gratis what would have cost any patient a ten-guinea fee. And,

The Autobiography of a Journalist

little by little, I began to get the "hang" of the subject.

Then I settled down to write my articles. I wrote one article of a thousand words each evening for a week, keeping to the subject while all the facts were fresh in my mind. But this time I did not sit up all night polishing what I had written. For it had sunk into my consciousness that when you begin to write in earnest you cannot afford the luxury of taking twenty-four hours to write one article, and I might as well stand or fall on a first attempt, suitably revised but not re-written entirely a dozen times, as hitherto.

Those articles which were signed by Matrons of Nursing Homes I had to send to them for approval. They came back with hardly a word altered. That heartened me, for I felt that if I could state the case for Twilight Sleep with sufficient accuracy to satisfy the experts it was also likely to satisfy the editor, who probably knew very little more about the subject than I had done when I started upon the adventure.

At last the series was ready and I sent my "copy" in, glad that the job was done. The writing from my notes had been easy, but the interviewing had been a torment. I have never blushed before or since as frequently as during that fortnight. A dozen times I had been on the point of going to the editor and turning the job in, but the knowledge that two years before I would have given my ears for a commission to write anything for a real paper drove me on. Much depended upon the fate of this attempt, and in my case everything depended upon my convincing not only the editor, but myself, that I could

Fleet Street at Last

go out and get information on an unfamiliar subject and turn it into readable articles.

Evidently the editor had not forgotten the anxiety which I had shown about the fate of my previous article, for this time I received a letter within three days informing me that he liked the articles and would pay me seven pounds ten for them.

Seven pounds ten made in my spare time in one fortnight!—and at work which, if exhausting to a bashful boy of twenty, was, so far as the actual writing went, a sheer delight. This swift progress surpassed all my dreams of those months and years during which I had struggled alone. I even found myself a hero in my own family circle, for with this tangible evidence of my prowess as a journalist the voice of domestic criticism was silenced for all time.

It is a pity we cannot all repeat the thrills which come during early years. The first prize at school, the first day in the chosen career, the first pound earned by one's own efforts—these are the supreme moments of life. To-day the sight of a new novel with my name on the jacket does not thrill me as the sight of that first little interview with the child actress did back in 1918. And a cheque for a hundred pounds means infinitely less, useful as it still is, than that letter telling me I had earned over seven pounds.

To me, in my enthusiasm, that letter was a token that the years of futile striving were behind, that I was about to reap what I had sown. In short, that I was established in my chosen profession.

Blessed faith of youth! Any experienced journalist would have told me that one little commission executed for one little paper, born only two years before and which would probably die within another

The Autobiography of a Journalist

two years, did not mean that the battle was won. Of all careers, that of the journalist is the most precarious. Men rise to be editors, are "pumped dry" of ideas, become out of date, and are seen no more. A paper succumbs to fierce competition and twenty or thirty capable writers with a hundred times my experience are thrown out on "the street" and seek to keep the wolf from the door by odd free-lance work while they apply for job after job, only to find that there are always a hundred other applicants. Many a harassed journalist who knows his job depends upon the "bright idea" every morning finds them hard to get and falls into the habit of a double whisky to jog his tired brain along. Then it becomes two "doubles," and then more, until his employers see which way the wind blows and out he goes to swell the ranks of the failures. For every success in Fleet Street there are several failures, apart from those who manage to struggle along living from hand to mouth.

Fortunately for me, I knew no journalists except the four or five on the audit staff to which I belonged and they, good fellows, kept the doubts they must have had to themselves. And so I was free to dream my dreams and imagine that success was just round the corner and that henceforth, with just a little luck, life would become a procession of days spent in writing articles, or helping to produce papers, with the music of printing machines all around me.

In his letter, the editor had asked me to call and see him. I scented another commission and went, thankful I had realised how much depended upon overcoming my shyness and getting those *Twilight Sleep* articles.

I was right. This time the great man greeted me

Fleet Street at Last

as a contributor of standing on the paper. He told me frankly that the series I had written was a test.

"You are young," he said, "and it was an unusual subject. I half expected you to throw your hand in. And only the man who will interview Beelzebub if he is asked to is any use at this game. So I tried you out. You did well. Now I want to talk to you about more articles. Different, this time."

He was, it appeared, handing over the woman's paper to an editress (in those days ladies were not called editors) and taking over the editorship of a film paper which his firm had just bought. Apparently it was necessary to make sweeping changes and he wanted to find one or two writers who could bring a fresh mind to bear upon films, which were expected to "wake up" as soon as the war was over. And it seemed that I was one of the "fresh minds" he had jotted down on his list.

He showed me a rough make-up of the paper in its new form and indicated certain articles which I was to write. He even asked my opinion regarding the make-up and contents. I had so often analysed papers and their contents in my own bed-sitting-room that I was ready with my answers. And there and then I suggested some ideas for possible articles.

"Get a clergyman who is friendly towards films to contribute an article showing how they can be used for good," I suggested.

He agreed. "Whom could you get?"

I mentioned a young vicar who had just returned from the Western Front—the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields.

"Make it a thousand words—copy by Thursday," answered the editor with decision. And that was how

The Autobiography of a Journalist

I first met one of the most popular and human preachers of our generation.

From that moment I switched my mind on to the task of finding possible topics for articles likely to interest the film trade. The result was astounding. For years I had been living without a single subject for a film article ever occurring to me. Now that my attention was centred on the subject, I found five or six a week. They were not all accepted, of course, but during the weeks that followed I usually found at least one of my articles in each issue. And the more I wrote about films, the easier I found it to go on writing on the same subject. It was my first acquaintance with the old Fleet Street axiom that it pays to specialise.

This business of specialising is an important question for all who write, or want to write. It became important with the passing of the spacious old days when journalism was not the helter-skelter business it is to-day. Progress is nowadays so rapid, the amount of material to be absorbed so great, that only the man who devotes all or most of his time to one subject can hope thoroughly to master its intricacies. No journalist, for instance, could hope to write on wireless, or films or books after a few hours' study of his subject. He may express a balanced opinion on one phase of it by consulting an expert, but to continue to write on that subject he must master its essentials for himself. And that will leave him precious little time for anything else. That is why so many writers have decided to specialise.

Specialising has definite advantages. It gives the writer a certain status, helps him to become known and usually supplies him with a more or less regular

Fleet Street at Last

market. In time he finds that editors who have noticed his work seek him out because they realise he can be relied upon in his particular field. And if the free-lance has time on his hands he can still write on other subjects—even indulge in the luxury of articles he wants to write and may or may not sell, with the comfortable knowledge that he has a sheet-anchor behind him.

There is, however, some danger in specialising. The new-comer should be warned that he may find himself more or less forced to write on that subject and that one only. Editors are rather inclined, when they find that a contributor is excellent at, say, crime stuff, to expect him to go on writing crime articles for ever, and to frown if he wants to turn to other subjects.

In choosing a subject, therefore, the wise man chooses one in which he is deeply interested, and which is also wide enough to give him all the scope he is likely to need.

There would have been a danger in an experienced journalist writing as much upon films as I did during the next four months, unless, of course, he had realised the enormous strides which the film industry was destined to make and did so with his eyes open. But for a new-comer, and one who had waited long for any chance, those film articles simply provided further adventures in journalism.

And it is true of journalism that nothing is wasted. Every scrap of knowledge gained, every new experience, comes in useful sooner or later. In newspaper offices the news editor who handles the flood of telegrams, messages and "copy" which flows over his desk does not tear up or even roll up those which

The Autobiography of a Journalist

are rejected. He throws them on one side intact, for he knows that before the night is out some big new story may make any of those rejected bits of information valuable. It is the same with the good journalist—he stores up in his mind everything he sees, hears or experiences. Sooner or later nine-tenths of it is useful.

At this time I wrote an article dealing with the film censorship. To write it I had to study for the first time the principles which govern all censorship, and also the views held by the average man on the subject. When, some years later, I was asked by a newspaper to write an article dealing with the censorship of stage plays, the information I had stored away in my mind when preparing that film article enabled me to “get my facts” with a minimum of wasted time. That is one simple example of how all knowledge is useful to the free lance.

By analysing the suggestions of mine which were turned down and comparing them with those which got into print, I learned what makes a story topical, and to some extent how to judge at a given moment a subject with “popular” appeal from one which is without it. I also made a discovery that every paper has its own “public” and every editor judges ideas not according to their literary or other value, but solely by their probable appeal to his readers.

It looked as though I were destined to drift into journalism via the films, which, to be truthful, interested me little except as journalistic material. And so I might have done but for a string of events connected with a Sunday newspaper during the closing months of the war.

This paper, after a short life of two years, seemed

Fleet Street at Last

destined to end an inglorious existence in the hands of a Receiver. At this time it was necessary in order to continue publication for some one to buy it within forty-eight hours and to bring out an issue the following Sunday.

The job looked hopeless, for the paper had at that moment no staff except a news editor and one sub-editor, no printers and very little organisation for distribution of copies. To carry it on meant building up almost an entire new staff—in the case of a newspaper, a big undertaking.

After hurried negotiations, the paper was bought by the firm which employed my editor, and at a moment's notice he was sent to take charge and by hook or crook get out an issue for the week-end.

He sent for me in a hurry and told me that the film paper would have to look after itself until his successor had been found. Meanwhile, he wanted me to turn in all the stuff I could to fill the gap.

I felt a sense of loss with my friendly editor gone to fresh fields, but I saw a chance here to increase my prospects, and incidentally my growing income, and for a fortnight I worked harder than ever before, using every moment of my spare time in the search for ideas and in writing articles. But I was far from happy. I was faced for the first time with that bugbear of the free-lance—the change of editorship. What would the new man be like? And would he continue to print my stuff, or bring in new contributors of his own choice? I determined to make hay while the sun shone and hope for the best.

Moreover, I bought the first issue of the Sunday newspaper produced by my friend the editor, and in an effort to keep in touch with him, sent along the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

following Tuesday a number of suggestions for what I judged to be improvements to the paper.

It was a case of fools rushing in where angels fear to tread, and I can only plead my youth. Any experienced journalist would have been amazed that an issue got together in three days by a scratch volunteer staff was so good. I saw only a few of the more obvious flaws and, knowing nothing about the difficulties which had had to be faced, not even knowing that the editor had not left the office for three days and nights, was rash enough to criticise the issue as though it had been the fruit of reasoned thought and long experiment.

I heard nothing for a fortnight except scraps of information retailed by journalist-members of the audit staff who had given up their week-ends to help with the production of the paper. It was my chief at the audit office who brought me news that my letter had reached its destination. He told me one day that the editor wanted to see me, and that eight o'clock that evening would be the best time to catch him with a few minutes to spare. "I think he's going to offer you a job," he added, as though the information were a matter of no importance, "and if he does, I should take it. This war won't last for ever, and you haven't the type of mind that thrives in the Civil Service." (As though I didn't know it !)

Punctually at eight o'clock I walked down Fleet Street to the offices of the paper. How many times had I walked down that same street and pictured the day when I could call myself a "Fleet Street man"? Now at last I might be going to get my chance. A real chance. Not writing about films, but about life in all its phases. I realised that the journalist is

Fleet Street at Last

the historian of to-day, and above all things it was To-day, with its pageant of human existence, that had always interested me. News ! With life as the raw material. That night I would not have exchanged my prospects with any man alive. During the ten minutes it took me to walk from the audit office to the bottom of Fleet Street I knew the supreme joy of a square peg which sees itself being unerringly propelled past all the easy round holes that lie around—into the one square hole it has long sought to reach.

I had expected to find the editor contemplating the day's work over a cigar, his staff happy at home for the night. Instead I found the offices filled with people. I did not know who any of them were, but they all seemed to be working against time, and apparently resigned to go on doing so indefinitely.

The editor received me in his shirt-sleeves, and brushed a pile of papers off the easy chair before asking me to sit down. His desk was piled with papers—contributions, I assumed.

I made some remark about late hours.

"Late ? " he echoed. " This isn't late. I haven't been sure which nights I can go home since I took on this paper. Clocks don't exist for us—only on Saturday night, when we have to catch the trains. I warned you you'd need enthusiasm for this job."

I assured him that to sit up all night creating a newspaper was my greatest ambition.

"That's why I've sent for you," he said. " You are young and you've got ideas. A film paper is no good to you if you can get anything better. Especially as I think you've a news sense. How would you like to join my staff here ? "

I answered truthfully that there was nothing in the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

world I should like better, but expressed, with unusual modesty, a doubt whether I should be much use.

"I want a junior reporter," he went on, "and I'd like to have you with me. On a weekly newspaper like this you'd get a far more comprehensive training than on a daily. There they work in watertight compartments. Here you have to do a bit of everything. Reporting, interviewing, writing, 'sub'-ing, and if you come I want you to go up on the 'stone' and see the pages through." (The "stone man" on a newspaper, I learned later, fits the news into the pages and instructs the compositors about last-minute corrections before the pages of type go into the foundry.)

"As for salary," he continued, "I can give you four pounds a week, which for us includes a twenty-four hours' shift beginning at ten on Saturday mornings. With Mondays off to make up for it. As for what you know, that doesn't matter. You are either a born journalist, in which case your instinct will see you through, or you will never be one, in which case out you go. But I think you have the makings of a newspaper man about you or I shouldn't offer you the job."

I was about to accept before he changed his mind, but he went on :

"Don't make up your mind now. Think it over. There is another side to the picture. If you don't like the work, or the paper does go under after all, you will be out of a job. Whereas if you stay where you are, you will probably be able to stay there when the war is over. Don't throw away a sure salary without reflection."

Fleet Street at Last

"Mr. ——," I answered. "I don't want to think it over. I accept. If I fail, I'm prepared to look after myself."

"Good boy," answered the editor, patting me on the back. "What notice must you give at the War Office?"

I explained that a month's notice was necessary, and suggested that while waiting I might be allowed to come along on Saturdays and pick up what knowledge I could of the routine of a newspaper office.

"Splendid," he said. "Come along next Saturday at one and I'll ask my news editor to let you see how things are done. You may as well meet him now."

He rang a bell, and a young man came into the room. "Here's your junior," said the editor, and explained that I was coming in as a learner for four week-ends before joining the staff.

The news editor shook hands, looked me up and down and said tersely, "I hope you'll like the work." He made some cryptic remark to the editor about "still wrestling with that confounded Manchester story" and disappeared. That news editor, I was to learn, was a Scot and a man of few words—with a heart of gold.

The editor shook hands with me, hoped I should be happy and that the paper would live for a month or two to give me a run for my money, and I found myself outside.

I remember feeling mildly astonished to find the buses still running in Fleet Street, and people hurrying along intent on their own business. News vans dashed past and a policeman directed the traffic in Ludgate Circus, just as if a miracle had not happened that night. How were people to know that five

The Autobiography of a Journalist

minutes before a village boy had been given a job as a real journalist on a real paper?

And if anyone at this point should deny my claim to the title, I would point out I had served a more gruelling apprenticeship to my trade, profession—call it what you will—than does the average professional man. Do not, I beg, begrudge a journalist the thin trappings of romance which are his. He earns them, first by striving and starving, and later by a precarious occupation which any fine day may leave him high and dry without warning.

My chief at the audit office took it all as a matter of course. I knew by intuition that he was glad to have helped me to get my opportunity, but he never said so. As usual he confined himself to a single remark, "You'll do it on your head." I owe a great debt to that man, who did more than anyone else to break down my inferiority complex. He taught me to believe in myself, and, indeed, once told me that many writers who aired their opinions upon any and every subject, and whom I held in awe, probably knew far less about life than I did after my early adventures. Gradually I came to believe there might be something in what he said. At all events I gained a measure of confidence—some might call it "cheek"—which earned me many a guinea in the days ahead.

The following Saturday I presented myself at the newspaper office, prepared to study journalism at the fountain-head. The editor was engaged and the news editor received me.

"Glad you have turned up," he said. "One of our fellows is sick, and I want you to cover some stories for us."

I was about to explain that I was only there to

Fleet Street at Last

learn when he threw some page proofs across the table to me, followed by a pencil, and said, "Put some cross-heads in the serial, will you? It's late away now."

Looking round I saw that the three people there were writing for their lives, and I guessed that to point out I really knew nothing at all would be a false move at the very beginning.

For a few moments I stared stupidly at the page proofs while I tried to imagine what a cross-head could be. Suddenly I had an inspiration. A file of the paper lay on a desk behind me. I turned up the same pages in the previous issue and by comparison soon discovered that by "cross-head" the news editor must mean the phrases, indicating the nature of the paragraphs following, which here and there broke up the solid type.

They were evidently used both to "lighten up" the solid columns of type and to arouse interest. I sat down again and after reading through the pages before me, put in similar phrases here and there.

Then I handed them to the news editor. He pulled them under his eyes without looking up—a habit of his, as I soon discovered, was to gather copy and pages to his eyes instead of turning his eyes to the pages—grunted, altered the position of one or two with some remark about making the page balance which I did not then understand, and tapped twice on his desk with a pencil.

At the sound of those taps one of three boys who were sitting at the other end of the room, absorbed in paper-covered fiction, sprang to life.

"Printers," said the news editor, and off sped my cross-heads to feed the machines waiting for the first

The Autobiography of a Journalist

edition, due away at four-thirty, which went to Northern Ireland and the Hebrides, or some such far-off places. I remember the localities because I wondered whether the Highlanders who bought the paper would notice any different "note" in those cross-heads as compared with the previous week.

My thoughts were recalled by the news editor rapping out, "You had better cut along and get some lunch. I want you to cover a mass meeting of teachers in Trafalgar Square at three, and after doing half a column, get along to see a fellow who has invented a new type of tube railway. And we shall want you back to give a hand here soon after five. There's going to be plenty on to-day."

This was not exactly how I had pictured myself "learning journalism," but the wisest course was obviously to have a shot at it, and reserve explanations until I had failed.

I lunched out, noticing as I came back that all the others were eating the midday meal at their desks, a pernicious habit which I afterwards refused to follow.

At ten minutes to three I was mingling with the small crowd around the plinth of the Nelson Column, feeling very important as I tried to understand what the meeting was all about. That crowd seems small to me now, after some years spent on the hunt for news, but then I regarded it as impressive and made a note of the fact. I even estimated its size as carefully as any theatrical manager ever estimated the value of an audience through the curtain peep-hole.

The crowd was mainly composed of young women—teachers I assumed—and the speakers were women. They were protesting apparently against the scale of

pay they received, or which had been offered to them, I forget which it was.

Greatly daring, but urged on by the thought of that "half-column" I had to write, I managed to squeeze my way to the plinth and climb up. Reaching the platform, I asked a woman wearing a big rosette if she would answer one or two questions.

"What for?" she asked sharply.

"For the Press," I replied.

I would have told her the name of my paper, but at the mention of the word "Press" she seized me by the arm and hurried me off to an imposing-looking woman with white hair who appeared to be a sort of master of ceremonies.

I did not catch what my guide said to her, for at that moment the crowd cheered, but it had an instantaneous effect. As though a spring had been released, the white-haired official went off into a discourse upon teachers' rights which lasted for twenty minutes, during which I struggled to sort out the facts from a mass of words, and get at least some of them down in my notebook.

I took pages of notes, and when she finished talking to me as suddenly as she had begun and shook me warmly by the hand, my fingers were aching with the unaccustomed effort to keep up with her oratory. I had my "story" down. The only question which agitated my mind as I rushed back to the office was whether I should ever be able to sort out the mass of conflicting impressions in my mind. It was the first "story" I had covered as a reporter, and I knew nothing of the journalistic knack of recognising non-essentials in a story and discarding them as one goes along.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Back at the office I found a vacant chair and settled down to write. "Enthusiasm was the key-note of an enormously successful mass meeting held by the Union of Women Teachers in Trafalgar Square yesterday afternoon," I began, and went on to explain what those agitating teachers wanted and why.

An hour later I was still writing, and beginning to be decidedly nervous as to whether there would be space for my story if I did not finish it quickly. From the continuous stream of "copy" which went upstairs to the composing department I judged that the paper must be nearly full already.

The news editor looked at the clock. "Haven't you nearly finished that teacher stuff, laddie?" he enquired. "There's that other story to be done before the seven-thirty edition."

"I'm just finishing," I answered.

A few minutes later I handed him the result.

"I couldn't get it into half a column," I said, with some trepidation. "It runs to fifteen hundred words."

The news editor smiled—a trifle grimly, I thought. "We'll soon put that right," he replied. He then began to scan my story at a rate which made me think he must be smelling the words I had written instead of reading them. That was another "knack"—scenting out the facts in copy at full speed—which I was to learn later came instinctively after one has been handling masses of "stories" and Press reports for years.

When he reached the end, he turned to the beginning and re-read the first paragraph. Then he blue-pencilled the word "enormously."

"Never indulge in superlatives," he rapped out, as he wrote "half-col." and threw the story into a wire

Fleet Street at Last

basket from which the sub-editors were taking copy and preparing it for the printers. "Now go and see that tube fellow and scurry back as quickly as you can. Don't be all day. We only want a column."

I was dismissed, but not ingloriously. My story was going into the paper, and I had learned one lesson. "Never indulge in superlatives." I made a mental note that future meetings—especially meetings associated with comparatively obscure causes—might be "successful" but never "enormously successful." That phrase was reserved in those days for the doings of the British Armies on the Western Front.

One thing worried me. I was certain that in cutting two-thirds of what I had written, the half-column which resulted would not do justice to the cause which the white-haired woman had so vociferously espoused on the plinth of the Nelson Column. I almost felt a traitor. I suppose that every beginner has always felt that way about his first story. It is hard to believe that one's maiden effort can actually be improved by the mangling which it undergoes at the hands of the trained sub-editor. Yet it is so. And if the public could only be given one issue of a newspaper in which every story and article was printed exactly as written by enthusiastic free lances, they would realise how much they owe to the men who do the donkey-work of journalism.

I found the need for haste exhilarating, and by six-thirty I was back at the office preparing an account of a new type of high-speed tube railway along which trains would travel at sixty miles an hour down inclines and slow up again by climbing a gradient when approaching the next station. In two hours

The Autobiography of a Journalist

I had forgotten all about women teachers and their pay, and was absorbed in engineering problems of a somewhat complex and startling nature.

This time the news editor did not even read the story. He marked it for a column and threw it to the chief sub-editor. "That's for the editions," he said. Then, turning to me, "Come along, I want you to look around upstairs."

He gathered up some papers and dashed out of the office, leaving his telephone ringing querulously, and several people waiting to speak to him. The seven-thirty edition was due to go to foundry in fifteen minutes and, whoever waits, the paper must not be late.

We climbed two flights of stairs and entered a large department almost filled with linotype machines, which were busily engaged in turning into type the copy which was coming up in a ceaseless stream from the editorial room below.

At the far end of the department was a long counter, ending up on the right side at a hatchway which, when opened, led straight to the foundry where the plates were made.

This counter was the "stone," and here were made up the pages of the paper. All but the news pages had already gone to the foundry. Those that remained were awaiting the final pieces of type which would fill them, sundry corrections, and the O.K. of the editorial man whose duty it is to cut and fit at the last moment, decide what shall be left out and see that a schedule worked out in minutes is observed. Short of stopping a criminal libel, it was more than the "stone man's" job was worth to allow one of those pages to reach the foundry late.

Fleet Street at Last

This was eventually to be my task on Saturday nights—to be in at the very birth of a newspaper.

It involved many responsibilities, the least of which was the ability to read stories in actual type upside down—for the “stone man” faced the compositor across the counter—and the most difficult the ability to cut the various features to fit the space available without waiting for proofs. This, I learned that evening, often involved using a story intended for the top of a column, lower down the page—which in turn meant remodelling the headings which varied in size with every position which the story might occupy in the page. To do that accurately and capably at top speed without even a proof to guide him is one of the things which make a good “stone man” valuable to any editorial staff.

To-day I believe most daily and Sunday newspaper men manage to get their papers to press and catch the last train or tram home. In the war days things were different. Most of the important news, including the *communiqués* issued by the British, French and Belgian head-quarters, came in at varying times from midnight up to four in the morning, and we had to handle seven editions. The first was at 4.30 in the afternoon, the next at 7.30. Then they followed quickly upon each other’s heels at 9.30, 12 midnight, 2.30, 4.30, with a late London stop-press (or “fudge”) edition at 5.15 a.m. After that was safely “away,” and all the discarded stories had been carefully re-read to make sure that nothing important had been missed, the late staff, having worked from ten on Saturday morning without a break of more than an hour in the evening, could go to sleep on camp beds kept in the office until the first trains left.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

All this I was to learn later. For the moment I merely looked on while the news editor passed the remaining pages of the 7.30 edition, and marvelled at the uncanny manner in which he ran his finger down passages of type which were upside down to him and indicated the exact point at which the story might be cut off, in order to fit a given space, and still make sense.

The last page through, he was given proofs of all the "overmatter"—the news stories and other features which had been set up but not used—and he went through them, making sure that nothing earmarked for the 7.30 edition had been missed. Then he marked some for other editions, cancelled others altogether and motioned to me to follow him away from the hustling linotypers and the smell of printers' ink, back to the editorial rooms below.

In his offices he attended to half a dozen messages, interviewers and such news reports as had accumulated during his absence. Hardly had he finished this than there was a rumble of machinery somewhere below us. The machines had started to print the edition which I had seen slide through that hatchway into the foundry ten minutes before.

A few minutes later and the first copies off the machines were brought up by a boy and placed on his desk.

He picked one up and I was interested to notice that his first action was to check the page numbers, to satisfy himself that the plates were on the machines below in the correct order. Cases of a few thousand copies of a newspaper containing no page five and two page sixes are not unknown in Fleet Street.

Having satisfied himself that all was in order, he

Fleet Street at Last

turned to the front page and regarded it critically. Then, remembering I was sitting by him, he pushed a copy across to me.

No one who has not worked in a newspaper office can appreciate the thrill experienced when for the first time you sit down in the evening and read what will be to-morrow morning's news for millions of people. The news which you have seen built up from hundreds of different telegrams, cables, messages, special articles, stories and reports into that miracle of condensation—a single issue of a newspaper. And incidentally, some of it news which, only a quarter of an hour before, you have seen rushed upstairs from that very room with the remark, "Four minutes to catch the seven-thirty main page."

In that first swift glance at the folded sheets, still wet from the press, there is ample compensation, or so I have thought many times since then, for all the trials and troubles, the alarms and disappointments, of getting the paper on to the machines. There is a saying in Fleet Street that any effort is justified by a good issue at the end of it. The journalist who cannot feel the "magic" of being one of the first human beings to read a story which is going to set all Britain talking the following morning has no business to be a journalist at all.

As I turned the leaves, wondering in my enthusiasm how anyone could resist buying our paper, I spotted a news story headed "Teachers demand more pay."

My first story for the paper had got into print. I read it through and, wonder of wonders, by some miracle of contraction, it had been cut down to five hundred words and yet all that was important still remained intact.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

The news editor was already at work again, going methodically over the news pages, striking out every story which was to come out before the 9.30 edition went to press.

"We are going to be tight next edition," he said to the chief sub-editor. "Keep your stuff down."

He was referring to one of the banes of a news editor's life, the necessity to set more stuff than he will possibly want in case of accidents. That big story to fill two columns may fizzle out and leave you two columns "down"—with only five minutes to go in order to catch your trains. Or a printer, in lifting a column of type into the "chase" or frame which holds the page of type together, may drop the lot two minutes before the last page must be in the foundry. To meet such eventualities, a certain amount of "overmatter," good enough for the paper in case of emergency, must always be on hand. Much of it is bought and paid for, and usually only a fraction ever sees the light of day.

The news editor called me over again. "Get some dinner," he said, "and then go to the Finsbury Town Hall. There's a bye-election meeting there and it may be lively. Havelock Wilson is speaking for the Coalition candidate. Be there by eight-thirty and just stay long enough to see what things are like. Then do half a column on it. No speeches. Just a pen-picture."

I was putting on my hat when he called me over again.

"I forgot you are new about here," he said, "you'll find the Wellington puts up a good meal. And never skimp dinner on Saturday night—it's a fatal habit.

Fleet Street at Last

I'd take you along but can't get out until the next edition is away."

I thanked him and made my way to the Wellington Restaurant, close to Bouverie Street, feeling very important, and wondering whether it could be true that one could earn money for participating in the adventures I had had that day. Compared with the dull routine of work on Army accounts, even the rag-time accounts which we handled in wartime, this new life was packed with romance.

And there was more ahead, for at the Wellington I found myself eating dinner with at least half a dozen journalists, whose faces I recognised from portraits in the papers. Here was evidence that I had joined the glorious company of Fleet Street. I treated myself to the best dinner I could afford to celebrate the great day.

On my way to Finsbury I realised, with some surprise, that those two news stories which had been passed to the sub-editors as a matter of course had already had their effect upon my self-confidence. I was no longer wondering whether my bye-election story would get into the paper—I knew now that imperfect as my copy was in its original state, I could at least get the facts down to paper, and write about three totally unrelated subjects in the course of a single day. Indeed, I felt rather glad that instead of a month's tuition, I had been landed in the thick of it by the staff man who had obligingly gone sick.

The election meeting was dull and thoroughly English. There was a handful of hecklers, but bye-elections in wartime lacked real fire. It was obvious from the start that the nominee of the Government would win the seat.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

By nine-thirty I was back at the office and half an hour later handed in my story.

"Not bad for a first day," commented the news editor. "Now you'd better knock off. Thanks for your help."

I protested I did not feel tired, that I would like to stay until midnight, but he shook his head.

"Next Saturday you may have to. I want you to try your hand on the 'stone.' Slip off while you can. And the editor wants to see you before you go."

I hated going, but it seemed wiser to carry out instructions. Nevertheless, how I envied those lucky fellows who were allowed to stay on right through the night.

A month later those same good colleagues were laughing at my appetite for putting papers to press, and they knew that if ever a man on the "late turn" wanted to get away early when I was due "off" at midnight, he could always get me to take his place, a fact which I believe gained me a certain popularity, especially among those men with wives and families.

Timidly I knocked on the door of the editor's room. Would he be as satisfied as the news editor?

He was in his shirt-sleeves, his carpet littered with papers and telegrams, his desk an untidy array of proofs.

"Come in," he said genially, and then, "I'm afraid I owe you an apology. For sending you out so soon, I mean. But you see how it is, we are short-staffed and some one has to do it."

I answered that I was only too glad to try and help, but that I doubted whether my first attempts had been much use. For one thing I had not yet got

Fleet Street at Last

used to writing readable copy against the clock, and with telephones ringing and tape machines ticking around me.

"That's only knack," said the editor. "In a month's time you will be able to write through an earthquake without winking an eyelid. And you've done well enough for a first day."

My conscience forced me to explain that what appeared in the paper after the sub-editors had finished with it bore little relation to what I had written.

"Don't worry about that," he answered. "If I gave you a list of the people who need 'subbing' line by line it would include some of the biggest names that appear in the papers. The question is, do you think you will like the life, or would you rather change your mind before there's any damage done?"

"If you did not employ me now," I replied, "I should walk Fleet Street from day to day until some one else did. It must be in my blood."

The kindly editor smiled.

"I knew that," he answered, "or I should not have encouraged you. You've already got a long way past those articles on—what was it?—Twilight Sleep. Well, go and get some sleep now. Oh, and here's a couple of pounds for your day's work. You will be paid the same amount for the next three Saturdays, until you join the staff altogether."

This was unexpected good fortune, but that evening money did not worry me. I was elevated to a pitch of ecstasy far above and beyond such mundane matters. I thanked him and waited in the general office long enough to get a copy of the edition as a souvenir of the night's work.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

As I walked up Fleet Street, tired and utterly happy, a motor-van shot out of Bouverie Street and sped away towards Euston. It was off to catch the Scotch Express and was carrying my story of the high-speed railway to thousands of homes across the border that I should never see.

CHAPTER V

ADVENTURES ON THE NEWS TRAIL

THREE weeks later I left the Civil Service. In the three years I had been working as a War Office auditor, I had discovered that figures were not my strong point. Some of the accounts which passed through my hands were mere forests of figures in which millions of pounds figured so largely that they lost all meaning. Ever since those days I have shied whenever faced with more than four figures in a row.

It may be there is something in the journalistic mind which is antagonistic to money when represented by signs on paper. I like to think my aversion to arithmetic is not peculiar to myself. Many Fleet Street men, undoubtedly, dislike figures. Which reminds me of the famous story told of one of Lord Northcliffe's most brilliant correspondents who, whenever asked for an expense account upon his return from abroad, would put off the evil moment as long as possible, and finally produce an elliptic statement, the last item of which was always "To preparing this account—two hours at 7/6 an hour=15/-."

That particular correspondent, for all his aversion to the production of accounts, was reputed to be something of an artist in their preparation. Another story still heard in Fleet Street concerns the day when he returned to Carmelite House, to be met outside by a colleague who informed him that the "Chief"

The Autobiography of a Journalist

was engaged in one of his periodic tours of the establishment to enquire into salaries. "And he's cutting us all down this time."

The special correspondent was unmoved.

"He can do what he likes with my salary," he replied, "but Heaven help him if he touches my expense accounts."

My own adventures into the realm of figures had been concerned with public money. Up to the time of my transference to London in 1915, the sale of a house involving fifteen hundred pounds had been a big deal in my world. In London I found myself one of five men who had to watch an expenditure which, beginning at about £33,000,000 per annum, rose to three times that sum.

In the course of time the Royal Air Force had been formed by the amalgamation of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service, and I was the first man to be transferred to handle the audit of the new wing of the fighting services.

The most interesting part of my duties consisted of visiting all the aerodromes in the Eastern Command (there were about seventy of them), and stock-taking in the Air Force depots at Greenwich, Kidbrooke, Regent's Park and elsewhere.

In those days new types of aeroplanes and engines were being evolved almost weekly, items such as synchronising gear were being scrapped as out-of-date before it could be unpacked or re-packed for dispatch to the front, and the amount of work to be handled was enormous. The little staff to which I belonged worked with a will, despite the fact that whatever discrepancies we found in the accounts, or whatever stores were missing, would at the end of

Adventures on the News Trail

a lengthy and time-wasting correspondence be "written off" as lost, stolen or strayed. I doubted then, and I still doubt now, whether that wartime audit work ever saved the country a halfpenny. At all events I only heard of one man being prosecuted for the theft of Government stores during those three years, and he had been injudicious enough to buy his wife a motor-car—on a corporal's pay.

Towards the end of May 1918 I received my last pay envelope from the War Office, and at ten o'clock the following Tuesday morning I walked into the editorial offices of the paper to begin my duties.

After starting work at nine, or before, all my life, ten o'clock seemed late, and I walked briskly down Fleet Street anxious to get down to the new job.

The offices were deserted, so I settled down in a chair and started reading back numbers of the paper. For two hours the peace of the office was undisturbed, and twelve o'clock was striking when the next arrival, the literary editor, put in an appearance.

At twelve-thirty the news editor came in, and other members of the staff followed. Some of them did not arrive until after lunch. These casual hours were something new to me. I did not then realise that every one of those men would cheerfully work the clock round two days running if it were necessary. Nor that there is little one can do on a Sunday newspaper before mid-week. There was a splendid spirit of discipline in that office, and an entire absence of clock-watching. But one would not have suspected it on a Tuesday morning. By Thursday the normal day had overflowed into the evening, while Friday meant a full twelve hours, with just enough time

The Autobiography of a Journalist

left over for a full night's rest before the twenty-four-hour press day arrived.

The news editor was a different man from the ruthlessly efficient machine I had seen on the four previous Saturdays. All he had to do on Tuesdays was to plan an outline of the following Sunday's paper, and discuss features and space with the literary editor. He considered Tuesday an "off duty" day, and talked freely with the staff about the happenings of the day, and past adventures when he had been a reporter in Scotland.

That was one of the first things which convinced me I had made no mistake in choosing this career—the complete absence of anything savouring of "rank" or "position" in a newspaper office.

I may have been fortunate in my experience, but during many years spent in Fleet Street, during which I have held every position on both newspapers and magazines from "cub" reporter to literary editor and editor, I have yet to meet the man who can successfully put on "superior airs" amid the splendid comradeship of the Press.

I had expected to be sent out on a batch of news stories—that Tuesday would be a repetition of Saturday, but without the editions going through—but the only thing I did on that first day was to look through a pile of provincial papers for possible "ideas." I marked several, taking care to note events which were taking place on the following Saturday.

These latter the news editor carefully filed to make sure that a wire was sent to our local man to cover them and send a report, if he had not already intimated by letter his intention of doing so.

Meanwhile the news editor was going through the

Adventures on the News Trail

London papers, and marking topics which looked like "lasting," until the week-end, or which were worth following up in any case to put into stock for use in an early issue.

In every newspaper office the material handled can be roughly classified under four heads. These are (*a*) the news, received through the regular agencies, correspondents and from special sources, (*b*) the regular features, (*c*) articles and "specials" which are based upon ideas submitted by outside contributors, (*d*) articles and special news and other stories which are based upon ideas suggested by members of the staff, and which are carried out by the reporters.

To hunt up and write stories falling in the last-named category is usually the task of the reporters, and the best training for anyone hoping to evolve his own ideas later on. A good reporter not only knows the quickest way to obtain information on any given subject, but must also be quick to grasp the "angle" on the idea which is in the news editor's mind. And he must be fertile and resourceful in "pulling off" the story if he encounters unexpected difficulties.

The newspaper reporter has been depicted by a thousand novelists, dramatists and film producers. Often he is shown as a blatant nosey-parker. Sometimes he is credited with a deductive mind which can see further through a brick wall than most people. The two schools of thought agree about only one thing—that all reporters and newspaper men are over-enterprising and prone to exaggeration.

The truth lies elsewhere. The trained reporter, provided he has a reasonably thick hide and does not worry about an occasional rebuff, has one of the most

The Autobiography of a Journalist

interesting lives in the world. And he is second only to the trained Scotland Yard man in resource, intelligence and intuition.

A newspaper man was the first man to discover Dr. Cook had not been to the North Pole. He discovered that fact by talking to him. Other men, including scientists well versed in the facts, had talked with Dr. Cook and not realised that there were flaws in his story. The journalist, accustomed to weighing up people and stories before committing anything to the columns of his paper, had his doubts about the authenticity of the story and was proved correct.

Nor does the experienced reporter exaggerate, or misuse his facts, for the simple reason that it is more than his job is worth to do so. It is an old dodge, when some public man or woman has been indiscreet in the course of a statement to the Press, to blame it on to the poor reporter. Usually when that happens the reporter is right and the person interviewed wrong, but it is difficult for an editor to tell them so.

I have in mind as I write two cases which illustrate why any experienced journalist sticks tight to his facts.

Shortly after the Armistice a certain Allied ex-Prime Minister came to London for the first time. It was announced that he would give no interviews to the Press, but one journalist managed to get into a reception given in the statesman's honour. The ex-Prime Minister spoke no English, but the journalist spoke French and in this language invited the statesman to give him a statement for publication.

Although he did not know it at the time, the choice of French was happy, for the statesman was going on

Adventures on the News Trail

to Paris from London, and was anxious, apparently, to create a good impression there. So he willingly agreed and the journalist took down his statement.

The newspaper man was old at the game, and wise, and before leaving he asked the statesman to sign the statement as authentic, which he did.

The article duly appeared in a Sunday newspaper and created something of a sensation, for the views expressed were crisp and to the point and dealt with matters connected with the peace, about which public feeling was then running high.

The Government was none too pleased and possibly invited their guest to explain his views. At all events the day after it appeared he repudiated the article in a statement circulated to the Press which said that he had given no interview or article to any journalist. Further, he wrote to the paper concerned demanding the usual few thousand pounds as damages.

Luckily, the journalist had his notes, and the statesman's signature at the foot of them. But I invite my readers to imagine what his position would have been had he not taken the precaution of getting that signature.

The other example concerns an article which I wrote myself during my first days in Fleet Street. I had been asked to write a column dealing with prospects for emigrants in a certain British Dominion, and I sought up-to-date facts to the London offices of the Government concerned. There I was received by an extremely disobliging secretary, who informed me at first that he wasn't there to answer fool questions put by journalists, and who finally threw me over a book dealing with the country, and written

The Autobiography of a Journalist

by some one else, from which he said I might get some facts, adding that meanwhile he was busy.

After reading that book, and interviewing one or two people who knew the country, I prepared an article mainly based on the book. In due course it appeared.

Two days later the editor of the paper sent for me, and handed me a letter which he had received from the High Commissioner for the country concerned.

Briefly that letter protested against the publication of an article which "contains more misstatements than any other article I have ever read," and it went on to suggest that if the paper wanted the facts, surely as a matter of courtesy it should have consulted his department and not printed the first inaccurate statement sent in by some irresponsible journalist.

If that editor had not known me as a trustworthy contributor, that letter, with the prestige of a High Commissioner behind it, might have wrecked my career. For the paper concerned was published by one of the most powerful groups in Fleet Street and news that a contributor is not to be trusted travels quickly in a profession where a single inaccuracy may cost a paper a year's profits.

I drafted a reply to the letter. In it I pointed out that if there were any misstatements in the article, they had originated in his own office. That it was based entirely upon literature lent me by his own secretary. And that I had, in any case, been told that his offices did not exist to give information to the Press, and therefore if inaccurate statements appeared he had only himself to thank. Finally, I suggested that in future he should cause enquiries to be made in his own department before making

Adventures on the News Trail

sweeping statements which had no foundation in fact and which might inflict irreparable injury upon an innocent man.

I showed my reply to the editor and he smiled. "The old story," he said. All I ever received in answer to that letter was a formal acknowledgment.

The wise journalist will keep every note and take every precaution, until a story has been printed for a month without being challenged. If he doesn't, then he will be lucky if he lasts a year in Fleet Street. Far from being irresponsible, your trained reporter is a model of accuracy and tact compared with a certain type of public person, who will not hesitate, if challenged, to save himself at the expense of the working journalist.

I had plenty of first-hand experience of the need for caution during the next three months. Four days in every week I was news-hunting. I found it a fascinating game. Who else but a young journalist could spend the morning at a secret Press conference somewhere in Whitehall, the afternoon at a drawing-room function in Mayfair with tea served in Dresden china cups, and the evening in a river-side public-house at Limehouse Reach, on the track of some of the relatives of a wretched white drab who had married a yellow man and was reported to have disappeared. After the regular hours and monotony of work on Government accounts the colour and freedom of a journalist's life was a thing of sheer joy. I almost begrimed the time necessary for sleep, and usually was up and chasing free-lance stories on my own within six hours of leaving the office on Sunday morning.

As a reporter I really learnt something about

The Autobiography of a Journalist

writing. Hitherto, if I had a thousand words to write I set aside a day, perhaps two evenings, in which to do it. Now I was expected to come back with my story, sit down at a corner of a desk in the office and reel it off at top speed impervious to the distractions of typewriters, tape machines, telephones and human voices. Within two months I could write a thousand words under these conditions in an hour and a half. Upon occasions of special urgency, such as I shall refer to later, I have turned out a thousand words in an hour.

This greater fluency caused me to alter my ideas of what constituted a day's work. Frequently I would write two thousand words at the office, and as much again for some weekly paper at home the same evening. I was learning that to make a good living at journalism you must either write very well or very fast. Quality or quantity are the only two roads to success. The wise man compromises between the two.

From among the hundreds of "news stories" which took me all over the country during my first six months in journalism, one stands out in my memory. It was my first "murder story."

We were handling the news of a very full Saturday night and had just got the 9.30 edition away when the news editor called me over.

"Here's a murder in North London," he said. "You'd better miss the midnight edition and run over. Interview the widow if you can. Get some stuff for a general story—it looks like being a big yarn. But it can't have more than two columns however good it is. We are full up now." He sighed wearily. "Why these fellows couldn't have their quarrel on a weekday, any night but this, beats me."

Adventures on the News Trail

I read the agency message he handed to me. The place mentioned as the scene of the murder was somewhere the other side of Islington, on the outskirts of north-east London. I was going to turn up a bus guide when the news editor shouted, "Don't wait for that. Get a taxi. Then you may be there first."

I seized a hat and dashed out. Half an hour later, after winding in and out of miles of streets thronged with Saturday night shoppers, the driver informed me I had reached the road I was looking for.

At the corner stood a policeman, and from him I asked the way to No. 43.

"What do you want at that house?" he asked.

I told him, and he grunted.

"It's first on the right, then first on the left, but I don't know whether they will let you in. The Detective-Inspector's there, and you can ask him. It all depends."

I made my way along a dark street of dilapidated houses, facing what appeared to be a gigantic ash-pit, and came to a house which was lit up, and which had a handful of loungers around the gate. Evidently the news of the murder had not reached those shopping crowds half a mile away.

A second policeman at the gate took my card in and returned to say that no one could be admitted. His tone had all the finality of authority on the job, so instead of wasting my breath in trying to see the Inspector I asked him to give me the story.

While I jotted down the details as he reeled them off, evidence fashion, I was racking my brains for some way by which I could get an original angle on the story. All our rival papers would have the stuff

The Autobiography of a Journalist

he was giving me—perhaps a little briefer, but essentially the same stuff. It was not an uncommon story in those days—a man had returned from the Front to find his wife had been “carrying on” with some one else. And he had murdered the other man. In this case the murdered man was married, and I seized upon that fact as my best chance of an exclusive story. If I could not get in to the woman inside that house who was making a statement to the police, perhaps I could talk to the widow of the murdered man.

I asked the policeman if he knew where I could find her.

“I know the party,” he admitted. Solemnly he thought over the matter. Just when I was beginning to think he must have fallen asleep, he added, “I don’t see as there’d be any harm in letting you know her address.”

I got the address, which was in a street about a mile away. Back to my taxi I hurried, and ten minutes later I was knocking on the door of a house even more dilapidated than the one I had left. This house had most of the glass missing from its downstairs windows and the holes filled up with newspaper. The door had no lock, and when I knocked it swung open.

A slatternly woman appeared and asked me what I wanted.

“Can I see Mrs. Brown?” I enquired, adding before she could speak, “I’m a journalist. It is urgent.”

“Oh, lor’,” answered the woman. “Can’t you leave the poor dear alone? Ain’t she been through enough to-night?”

Adventures on the News Trail

I slipped five shillings into her hand, and assured her that I would not keep her long—"just one or two questions."

"Come on, then," she said, ungraciously.

I followed her into the kitchen. Like the passage, it was indescribably filthy. The walls were so black that they absorbed most of the light from a single gas-jet. The ceiling was missing in places, with the bare laths showing through. The place stank of fried fish and washing.

"There she is," said my guide.

The woman I had to interview was sitting on a wooden box beside the dying embers of a fire, holding her head in her hands and moaning to herself. I caught the words, "They've got 'im" and "Jim—murderer."

I was about to try to attract her attention when she burst into a flood of tears. I have never seen an adult person cry like it before or since. Here was tragedy. That night the woman before me had lost her husband, probably whatever income she had ever known, and certainly her reputation. She was the wife of a murderer. No wonder she called to God to "take her out of it" while a slatternly neighbour and a strange young journalist stood and watched, and half a mile away the crowds poured in and out of the shops and cinemas.

Loathing myself for intruding, I at last managed to explain that I was a reporter. I gave her a pound and, having tried to express my personal sympathy, I told her that the police would tell me nothing and I wanted the public to have the true story. Would she, therefore, answer one or two questions?

It was the first time I had ever attempted to take

The Autobiography of a Journalist

down a statement from some one distracted beyond endurance, and I hope never to have the experience again. She obviously wanted to pour out her story to some one, and started to do so, only to go off into paroxysms of grief every time she came to her husband's part in the tragedy.

She was a frail little woman, worn out by constant toil before this terrible thing happened in her life, and once, when she seemed only semi-conscious, I became so alarmed that I went myself and knocked up a publican on the corner to get some brandy.

Bit by bit I got what Fleet Street calls a "scoop," and two hours later, having promised the woman she would receive some further payment for her story, I was speeding back to Fleet Street.

By 2.30 the full story was in the paper, and the news editor had paid me the compliment of running nearly four columns of it.

But I was not happy. Perhaps I was still too sensitive to make a good reporter. The picture of that distracted woman kept reappearing in my mind. I could think of nothing else that night. I hated the Press, which poked its nose into other people's tragedies and profited by them, and I hated myself for helping one paper to do it.

Just before three that morning I was rushed off to a warehouse fire south of the Tower Bridge. It wasn't a bad story because it was a food warehouse, and food was short just then. But for once I could not concentrate. When I read the fire story the following morning and compared it with the reports in other papers I found that I had not even got the name of the firm down correctly.

That is why trained journalists have to treat every

Adventures on the News Trail

story, however tragic, as so much raw material. If a news editor allowed himself to be depressed by the facts which he handles in the course of any night's work he would go mad in a week. If a reporter cannot look on the seamy side of life and, like a doctor, forget it five minutes later, he is in for a short life and a not very gay one.

There was a thrill about this news-gathering which appealed to me, but it had one drawback. A free-lance mostly picks what he will write about. A staff man, as I was then, must take hold of any story given to him. And I was still so afflicted by shyness that I suffered torture very often in the course of my work.

I recall being sent to interview a woman then, and still, prominent in feminist movements. She is the most charming and sympathetic person imaginable, yet I walked up and down the pavement outside her house for a quarter of an hour before I could screw up my courage to knock.

That same woman has been a friend of mine for many years past, but I have never told her of my terror before that first meeting. It would sound so absurd to anyone except those who have studied shyness or experienced it in their early years.

Because a reporter has to meet so many people, and push his way to the front so often, I preferred the other part of my work, which was putting the paper "to bed," as Fleet Street calls it.

The "stone man" has easily the most interesting task of all the multitudinous activities which are needed to produce a newspaper. He is an ambassador from the editorial department to the composing-room. His task is to get the compositors to carry out all

The Autobiography of a Journalist

corrections and suggestions coming to him from the editorial department without creating a riot. Sometimes that was difficult—last-minute corrections piled upon already tired men often created a situation which needed careful handling. But in the end we always got every edition through to time.

The composing-room was separated from the foundry only by a thin partition. The temperature of the former was eternally hovering around the ninety mark, and redolent of printers' ink. Even the stone floor was warm, so that one's boots seemed to pinch the feet, and I was often sorely tempted to follow the example of the compositors and change into carpet slippers at the beginning of the Saturday night "shift."

The "feature pages," those which did not carry any late news, all went away on Friday or early on Saturday morning. My work consisted of seeing that about eight news pages went to the foundry to time for the 4.30 edition, and changing about four of those pages—sometimes all of them—for each subsequent edition through the night.

Every change meant consulting the news editor concerning what was to come out, seeing that fresh and urgent news went in, cutting that news to fit the space available, amending headings as required and finally glancing hurriedly over a proof of each page "hammered off" by the compositor immediately before it went into the foundry. And all this had to be accomplished at high speed—sometimes we changed and got away four pages in half an hour.

Over and above these duties the "stone man" was expected to keep his eyes open for mistakes missed by the printer's readers, for possible libels, for

Adventures on the News Trail

inaccuracies of any description and for all points of questionable taste.

His motto, which was observed under all circumstances, was "when in doubt, out," that is to say, anything doubtful was held over until it could be discussed with the news editor.

Given a good team of compositors, and a helpful head of their department, and I was fortunate in both these respects, work on the stone is an intensely interesting experience.

The foremen-compositors with whom I came into contact recognised my youth and inexperience and took me under their wing.

From them I learned more about the craft of printing than the average journalist ever knows. Printing and racing were their twin gods. They were then earning more money than any man below the news editor upon our staff, and this they augmented or depleted, as their luck went, by spending two days a week at the races. One compositor in particular, I recall, had such a detailed knowledge of sport in all its branches that when one Saturday evening I heard that our sporting editor was ill, and rushed up to the composing-room in alarm to find out in what state were the sporting pages then due away in fifteen minutes, I discovered that the expert compositor had already made up all the sports pages without waiting for instructions—and made them up so well, down to the racing tips for the following week, that the sporting editor knew he could never again impress us with references to his indispensability.

The compositors signified the moment when they finally admitted me to their confidence by allowing me to take tea with them during the night shift. It

The Autobiography of a Journalist

was a generous concession, for in those days our difficulty was to get anything hot after midnight on Saturday—it was war time and there were no facilities for night-workers on Sunday mornings. Yet I still shudder when I think of those mugs of tea with which we whiled away the time between the 2.30 and 4.30 editions.

At six o'clock on Saturday evenings a bucket of water was placed over a gas ring. Into this a pound of tea was emptied, and then the mixture was left to simmer until required. From eight o'clock onwards any man in the department who was thirsty would dip in his mug, add a splash of milk from a bottle kept on a shelf above the bucket and carry it off to his working stand. When the bucket got low, more water and tea were added.

I used to dine late and by the time I felt thirsty that tea had been boiling for about five or six hours. Its taste was that of water in which a large amount of dressed leather had been boiled. The only way in which I could drink it was by reversing the usual process and taking to the office with me a bottle of milk. To a cup of this I would add a dash of what those compositors called "100 per cent tea." Even then it was too strong. Yet such was the need for something to drink after a few hours in the high temperature of the composing-room that I never refused my mug of tea every hour from midnight until I turned in on a camp-bed in the office below after the 5.15 "fudge" edition had gone safely away.

Spurred on by necessity, and a healthy dislike for letting mistakes slip by, I not only learned to read type backwards without proofs—really a simple trick—

Adventures on the News Trail

but I also mastered that unexplainable journalistic trait which enabled a man to glance at a page proof and instantly fasten upon the one typographical error which it contained. This is really the outcome of training the eyes to "sense," as it were, the accuracy of the words as it passes over them without any pause actually to read what it sees. That it is possible to "smell" inaccuracies any journalist knows. One of the directors of that paper could be relied upon to point out nine mistakes out of every ten in any newspaper handed to him within five minutes of receiving it—in which time he could not possibly have read the pages over.

Accuracy of a different nature is demanded of the sub-editor. The time I spent in sub-editing while on my first paper was usually confined to a few hours a week, but more than once, when our regular political sub-editor was away, I found myself chosen, because of a somewhat detailed knowledge of both British and international politics, to deputise for him.

This meant handling at least one and sometimes two or three of the big news stories of the day. They would begin with a news agency message reporting an important speech or happening. If it seemed like a big story, a "top" (top of a column space) was reserved for it, and every shred of additional information which arrived by telegraph, post, telephone or reporter, rushed to my desk. My task as sub-editor was to digest all those messages, to fill in any necessary blanks by getting into touch with some authority on the question involved, and then to prepare a reasoned statement of the whole subject "by our political correspondent." It was the task of

The Autobiography of a Journalist

getting information about future happenings in connection with special stories of this nature that first brought me into touch with many of the Ministers in the Coalition Government and members of Parliament.

Handling the big story of the day in this way left one very little time for anything else. The story had to be revised and brought up to date for every fresh edition, and the sub-editor was not allowed to forget that upon a full complete and attractive account depended a large portion of the circulation the following day.

By nine o'clock on Sunday morning, when I stood upon Blackfriars Underground Station, free until the following Tuesday, most people would have had enough rush and bustle for one week. But I was still young, and by three o'clock on Sunday afternoon I was up again and settling down to my second string—the free-lance connection which I was building up and through which I made use of much information which I gathered every week but which was not suitable for my own paper. Although I did not realise it then, the years during which I had worked every week-end in order to “progress” had firmly fastened the habit of a seven, or at least a six and a half-day week on me, so that I was restless and felt lazy if I left writing alone for a whole day like other and more fortunate mortals. That same “urge” to work longer hours than most people consider necessary is still with me, and I perceive now I shall always obey it.

One of my first successes as a contributor to other papers after reaching Fleet Street was a “life” of a *légionnaire* in the French Foreign Legion, then

Adventures on the News Trail

fighting in Alsace, which I wrote at the request of one of the more melodramatic weekly papers.

I had never served in that much-dramatised regiment. Nor, when I undertook to write the story, had I ever set eyes on a *légionnaire*. But eight thousand words at thirty shillings a thousand was too much to lose without making an effort, and among some French troops who were then visiting London, and whom I managed to see in barracks, I found a *poilu* who declared he had served for three months with the Foreign Legion.

From this man I obtained a mass of highly lurid material, in exchange for five shillings and a couple of drinks. I also found an old book dealing with the Legion in Algeria in the shilling box at a Charing Cross Road bookshop.

From this material I compiled as thrilling an account of life with the Legion as any reader could desire. It teemed with heat, deserts, tribesmen, brutal sergeants and thirst. It was the first long feature which I had ever attempted, and the editor liked it and asked for more. I recollect that the cheque in payment came to me one wet day when I was kept from the office by a chill and cheered me up enormously.

As the editor of that weekly paper had asked for more, more he had to have. For I should have regarded a market lost as a slight upon my journalistic ability.

My next story, indeed, came very near to being a big feature in my own paper. It was an account of the escape from Belgium of an old English lady of sixty.

I found the heroine of that tale staying at West

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Kensington within a few doors of the house in which I had myself lived in 1914. Looking at her wrinkled face and frail hands, it was impossible to believe that this woman had planned an escape for herself and alone, by swimming or fording a canal in mid-winter and climbing, somehow, through barbed-wire defences.

Here was a good story and I made up my mind to exploit it. *My Escape from the Huns* ran to five thousand words, and produced eight guineas, half of which was handed over to the woman.

Stories like these were the "high lights" of my early free-lancing efforts, but one could not find them every week. And when they were written there still remained much information which I learned as a reporter and of which I was not making any use.

Meeting my old chief of the audit staff one day I talked over possible markets with him, and he gave me the interesting news that during all the years he had been in Fleet Street it had been his practice to pay for his lunch by writing a couple of gossip paragraphs for the *Daily Mirror* or *Daily Sketch* and dropping them in on the way to his favourite tavern. For these two paragraphs he was paid five shillings, half a crown each. He told me that contributions which were really authentic and topical were usually acceptable, and advised me to try and "unload" in this way advance information and anecdotes which were of no use to my paper.

"Writing gossip is an art, like talking," he said, "but when once you set out to find it you will be amazed how much information you collect in the course of a week. Compression is the thing. Not a superfluous word, and not more than seven lines

Adventures on the News Trail

in all. Also remember that gossip pages go away early. Paragraphs intended for the next day should be in the hands of the man making up the page by midday at latest."

This looked like easy money, for my "nose for news" and my imagination combined, could easily produce, I thought, an abundance of paragraphs every week. I forthwith decided that I, too, would consume a choice lunch each day at the expense of some gossip-editor.

I prepared a specimen batch of notes—political, social, anecdotal and about people in the news. Then my courage failed me, and instead of sending them to the *Daily Mirror* as I had intended, I decided to try my 'prentice hand in the provinces first. I sent then to a Glasgow paper which published a gossip feature and awaited the result.

Evidently that first batch of gossip had some merit, for almost by return of post I received a letter from the editor of the Glasgow paper saying that it would be used, and asking me if I were prepared to contribute a dozen paragraphs a week regularly for a fee of half a guinea. It was not princely pay, but all was grist that came to my mill, so I accepted the opportunity.

That was my first regular newspaper commission as a free-lance and I wrote a batch of gossip paragraphs for that paper every Monday evening for ten years. Long before the arrangement came to an end the half a guinea had ceased to be anything but a loss, for I could make considerably more than that in the time it took to do the dozen paragraphs. But I had not the heart to cancel that first commission until the proprietors of the paper made

The Autobiography of a Journalist

changes in their make-up which released me from the arrangement.

Heartened by this success, I began to fire gossip in all directions. A month later I was contributing regularly to the *Daily Mirror* and a second provincial picture paper. Paragraphs for my own Sunday paper followed. Then occasional contributions to two weekly periodicals.

Most of the paragraphs which appeared in the London Press were paid for at half a crown each. I suppose I wrote sixty to seventy a week. I began to look for them and found to my astonishment that my journeys about town after news stories rarely yielded less than half a dozen paragraphs a day. For months I was making at least four pounds a week in this way, which meant nearly doubling my salary. And my market was expanding. Papers began to know me. The *Daily Graphic* (now defunct) asked me to cover the opening of the Royal Academy Exhibition for them. I wrote four paragraphs about it and received one pound for half an hour's work. I found that most of the regular gossip writers did not care about turning stuff in on Sundays, and that gossip material was often short on that day. So I made a point of coming back to Fleet Street after I had slept, and turning in a good batch of stuff. Most of it was used, and my income went up again.

Of course, the inevitable happened. I began to see every piece of news in terms of gossip, apart from the news stories which I did for my paper. It was easy money and the temptation was too great. When I got wind of the fact that Kerensky, the Russian ex-Premier, intended coming to London and was going to make a dramatic appearance at a Labour Party

Adventures on the News Trail

meeting, I turned that piece of news into a gossip paragraph and sold it with the rest.

Perhaps it was as well for me that I did, for I happened to mention that "scoop" in the office and the news editor heard of it. By this time he was a friend of mine out of the office, and he took me to task.

" You may think it clever to sell a news story worth a "top" and a couple of guineas at least, for half a crown. I don't," he said. " Take my tip and cut out four-fifths of this gossip writing. It is bringing you in a few shillings now, but if you go on a little longer it will ruin you for any other sort of writing. And gossip writers never grow rich. What you are doing is to waste good material. Why, if one of those paragraphs is worth expanding into a full news story a week, you are missing your market. And the experience."

I realised the truth of what he said. I had used my news sense to get into a rut, spurred on by the novelty of being able to put money in the bank for the first time. It was one of those occasions in life when the wise man takes the long view and sacrifices the immediate income for the sake of to-morrow.

When the literary editor of my paper took me on one side and by going over a number of my paragraphs proved to me that in a dozen instances I had crammed a possible half-column into seven lines and sold it for half a crown a time, I was convinced.

My ambition to become a "Gossip King" was promptly abandoned and my connection vanished as quickly as it had been built up. All except a few paragraphs which I wrote for my own paper, to pay for my lunches, and the batch which I continued to

The Autobiography of a Journalist

send to Scotland long after I had become an editor myself.

I had anticipated a nasty gap in my activities for some weeks, but only a few days later a contributor to our paper told me that one of the popular weeklies had asked him if he would make a tour of some of the big industries in England and write a series of articles upon their stories. He was too busy to spare the time, but he had been asked to suggest some one who could, and he suggested that I should tackle the job.

I could, I knew, get clear at midnight on Saturdays by special arrangement, and also, occasionally, get Tuesday free as well as Monday. That gave me three clear days. Feeling by this time that I could write almost anything in reason, I saw the editor concerned, and finding that the payment offered would leave me with eight guineas clear after paying expenses, on each article of fifteen hundred words, I arranged to take it on.

The first firm I had to visit was J. and P. Coats of Paisley. I caught the midnight train from Euston on a Saturday night, spent Sunday discovering how uninteresting a Scots town can be, and on Monday utilised the day learning the history of the great cotton business. Monday night I travelled southwards again, and after a wash and brush-up at Euston, was at my desk by twelve o'clock on Tuesday morning.

For some of those articles--the ones that interested me most--I actually worked for a day or two in the mills or workshops concerned. I still have a vivid and wholly pleasant memory of two or three days spent working in a cotton mill at Blackburn, during which time, in order to complete my "local colour,"

Adventures on the News Trail

I also lived in a mill-worker's cottage. Those three days were worth the journey north, and two nights spent in travelling. For they revealed to me the courage, loyalty and essential good-nature of the Lancashire people.

By the time the series came to an end I had learned more about the working days of the mass of our people than most people will ever know, knowledge that has been of the greatest value to me many a time since—one more proof that in journalism no lesson is ever learned in vain.

Indeed, examples of the value of knowing how to dig up a story at a moment's notice were constantly occurring. I remember when an expert contributor who had undertaken to write us an article on the future of aircraft for a special number of the paper went away for the week-end and forgot all about it.

We did not discover the absence of the article until it had been advertised, and it was too late to get anyone else to write it. When it *was* discovered there was an outcry, in the midst of which I offered to write the article myself.

The editor was frankly dubious and said so, especially as I admitted that I knew nothing at all about aircraft or engines. It was, however, a case of Hobson's choice, and so I was told to go ahead and turn in a column the following morning, which was press day.

Jumping into a taxi I began a series of calls at the Royal Air Force store depots and certain London aerodromes, where I had met and known the officers during my days with the audit. A number of them had been transferred to other stations, but one or two were still there and from these I got a rough idea

The Autobiography of a Journalist

of the prospects for aircraft design and the internal-combustion engine, including a suggestion that aeroplanes would be driven by dynamite instead of petrol ! The officer who made this latter suggestion silenced my scorn by producing a little American book which contained the same idea, with a description of how it could be done. I borrowed it and went home to write my article.

The following morning the editor admitted it read all right, but said that he was dubious about using it as a full column as it was not the work of an expert. Especially were my editorial colleagues mirthful about my suggestion of dynamite fuel. I was fully content to have got the paper out of a hole and willingly agreed to my effort being cut down to half a column, and reset at that length.

Hardly had this been done when a proof of the original column article came down from our managing-director, who was supplied with early proofs of all main features, marked in the corner "Very good—don't cut."

That was the first sign of recognition from our mighty proprietors and it pleased me far more than it did the compositors, who, when I went up to see the 4.30 edition through that afternoon, asked me why we were "mucking about with that blessed column." Only "blessed" was not the word they used.

A little thing, perhaps, to have one's effort praised, but it gave me more confidence than I had a few months before. And in journalism confidence in your work is absolutely essential to success. If you do not believe that your ideas are as good as the next man's, and that you can write as well as he can at

Adventures on the News Trail

short notice upon any subject on earth, you had far better take up poultry-keeping, or open a tobacconist's shop, than come to Fleet Street. The goodwill of a tradesman is in his business ; the journalist's goodwill is in himself.

CHAPTER VI

MORE ADVENTURES IN JOURNALISM

I WAS now writing four or five news stories every week for my own paper, in addition to numbers of articles for the weeklies and provincial Press. Having thus consolidated my position I sighed for fresh worlds to conquer. The next step was to discover a topic which would form a suitable subject for a "campaign," or series of articles.

This was not easy, for in those days almost every shred of news published had some connection with the war, and that subject had been thoroughly exploited from, apparently, every conceivable angle which would be passed by the censor.

I found the right topic by accident. Certain councillors at East Ham had been surcharged sums of money which, according to the Minister of Pensions, they had spent without authority upon providing boots for soldiers' children. Here was undoubtedly a good human story.

I was sent down to East Ham to write it up. What I discovered there convinced me that the absence of any funds from which boots could be bought in winter for children led to great hardship and many cases of illness. Indeed, it was the number of children who became sick through sitting in school with wet feet that had aroused the compassion of the East Ham Councillors and brought the wrath of Whitehall down on their heads.

More Adventures in Journalism

In East Ham I talked to the councillors, to the masters of the schools, and to the mothers of the children for whom boots had been supplied. What I thus learned convinced me that here was a flaw in the arrangements which the nation had made to provide for the families of Britain while the bread-winners were fighting our battles.

The next Sunday we published an article "by our special commissioner" exposing the scandal, and calling upon the Government to do their duty and allow grants to be made wherever certified as necessary by the headmasters or mistresses of schools.

That first article brought no response from White-hall, so the following week I returned to the attack by printing the facts concerning typical families. This article I followed up by requesting and obtaining an interview with the Minister concerned.

He was one of the Labour Ministers in the Coalition Government then in power, and I found him entirely sympathetic with my contention that there was a moral obligation upon the country to do something in the matter.

"But without the express authority of Parliament," he explained, "I cannot act. And Parliament is too busy to discuss the matter for some weeks at least."

I pointed out that "some weeks" meant that most of another winter would have gone by, with much preventible sickness and privation.

"If the Government will not carry out their obligations," I said dramatically, "then my paper must expose you and undertake the task."

It was a statement made on the spur of the moment, and I expected the Minister to defend himself energetically.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

'To my surprise, he eagerly seized upon the suggestion.

"You would be doing a great work if your paper would start such a fund before the winter," he answered. "Government intervention must necessarily be slow. There are so many people and authorities to be consulted and so much investigation to be made before we could move. Go ahead and God speed you."

As I picked up my hat, he shook me by the hand—this man who, I had announced to the world the previous Sunday, was "lacking in any human feeling"—and added, "If it helps your campaign to attack me, do so by all means. I'm used to it, and it may do good by calling attention to whatever scheme you devise."

I left Whitehall more or less committed, by a chance remark, to carry the campaign further. By the time I reached the office the main outline of a scheme had crystallised in my mind. If the directors of my paper would support me I would start a Boot Fund and appeal to our readers to honour an obligation which for red-tape reasons the Government ignored. Then, with the money raised, I would make arrangements with a sufficient number of multiple shoe shops to enable all approved applicants to get their children fitted with boots of a certain price in their nearest town.

I expounded my scheme to the editor. He was sympathetic but wiser than I.

"You say you will control the whole thing and do all the work involved," he said, "but you don't know what you are up against. You will be swamped. The work will kill you."

More Adventures in Journalism

But by this time I was as elated at the prospect of working all night for the children of Britain as any convert at a revivalist meeting, and I brushed his arguments aside.

"If the firm will give me permission to open the Fund I will look after it."

Two days later I explained my scheme all over again to our managing-director. In the enthusiasm of youth I became almost lyrical about this great opportunity to do something for the heroes of the trenches. Evidently I convinced him, or perhaps my editor had already got his consent before I was sent for. At all events, the managing-director, at the conclusion of my speech, said briefly :

"Very well. Go ahead. And we will start the Fund with a subscription of five hundred pounds."

Having launched the Boot Fund with a flourish of trumpets in our next issue, the news editor, who had throughout been sceptical about the whole project, pointed out that I was liable to a fine not exceeding five hundred pounds, with the alternative of six months' imprisonment, for inviting subscriptions from the public for a charity not officially registered. He further pointed out that I should have to keep books, and have them properly audited.

"Altogether," he added, "you are in for a period of enlightenment."

I did not see the force of his remark until nearly a month later, but without delay I took the precaution to register my Fund as a War Charity.

Meanwhile, in addition to the public appeal in the paper, I had written personal letters to various public men and women who I thought for one reason or another might be disposed to contribute.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Those letters brought me in touch with a number of distinguished men and women who were charming in their sympathy and help. I remember that the first of them I went to see, in response to a letter, was Miss Maude Royden, then Assistant Pastor at the City Temple.

Miss Royden had, I suspected, met at first hand the problem which I was trying to tackle, and after ten minutes' talk about life in the slums generally, she gave me a cheque for five guineas.

Money rolled in during the first three weeks, and at the end of that time the Fund totalled four thousand pounds and I felt safe in making my first offer to the wives of serving soldiers or sailors whose children needed boots which they were unable to buy.

The scheme I had devised was as simple as it could be, remembering that certain checks against fraud were necessary in the interests of both the genuine applicant and subscribers to the Fund.

On receipt of an application for boots, an enquiry was forwarded to the local Pensions Committee controlling the area concerned, asking for any information they could give regarding the *bona fides* of the applicant.

Upon the receipt of a favourable reply, a letter was sent to the applicant authorising her to have her child, or children, fitted with boots of a certain price at a specified shop near her home. A duplicate copy of this letter was sent to the Manager of the shop, as his authority to supply the person presenting the original of the letter.

The transaction completed, the trader forwarded the two letters, together with a receipt signed by the

More Adventures in Journalism

applicant and an account for the boots supplied, to me.

It seemed plain sailing. Never was an organiser so disillusioned. My "period of enlightenment," as the news editor had called it, began with the delivery of the post on the day following the first appeal for applications for free boots.

I arrived at the office on the Monday, normally a holiday, anxious to see if there was any response. There was. That first post totalled about a thousand letters. As I gazed at them, I had the first inkling of what was ahead.

A week later applications were arriving by the sackload, and despite all my vows that I would be independent and never ask for help from those who had prophesied exactly what had come to pass, all the staff were working until eleven o'clock at night to save me from being completely overwhelmed and subsequently imprisoned.

Manfully we struggled to handle the piles of letters. As one read them and realised that the accumulated sacks never seemed to get any smaller, but grew and grew, it seemed that every soldier's wife in Britain had children by the score without a boot between them. I think that if it had been humanly possible, I would have backed out of the whole scheme. But it wasn't. Somehow we had got to carry on the good work at least until the Fund, which now stood at five thousand pounds, had been exhausted.

The next snag to arise was the discovery that while certain local Pensions Committees co-operated with us most helpfully, others would not at first reply, and only after repeated applications could I get even the most sketchy and unhelpful information from them.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Now it was obviously unfair that deserving cases in the unhelpful areas should be passed over for reasons which were no fault of the applicants, and so we had to keep pelting the indolent committees with letters until a satisfactory reply was received.

This led to considerable expenditure on stamps and stationery, and as the firm had agreed to pay all the expenses of the Fund, so that every farthing subscribed could be actually invested in boot-leather, I was afraid I should become unpopular in high quarters. Fortunately, as it happened, the directors paid out cheerfully for all the bills we were obliged to incur. Otherwise that Boot Fund would have landed me in bankruptcy or worse.

The next thing was to make arrangements for the supplying of the boots. Leaving my unfortunate colleagues to make some sort of impression upon the mass of unopened letters, I went down to Leicester, bent upon getting the very best terms I could from the boot trade.

I do not think I have ever been so disillusioned about human nature, or at all events, business nature, as I was during the next three days.

Considering that the boots were required for a War Charity, and that my firm was paying every half-penny of expense in connection with the Fund, I expected the wealthy boot firms, whose directors were patriotically encouraging local recruiting, and lending their profits to the Government at 5 per cent interest, to supply willingly and at cost price all the boots I needed. In this way they would be helping the cause without contributing a penny, for obviously the cheaper I could buy the boots, the more applicants I could assist with any given sum of money.

More Adventures in Journalism

The first manufacturer I saw was a prominent public man, closely identified with various patriotic activities. He was also a very rich man. I had expected his ready approval of the scheme. Great was my surprise, therefore, when at first he refused to co-operate at all on the ground that it meant "a lot of trouble," and finally when he agreed to supply the boots but refused me more than 5 per cent discount for cash.

I have to confess I told him exactly what I thought of him—no doubt very impertinent on the part of a young man towards a white-haired patriarch who was giving up his valuable time to War work.

The next firm I saw "were not interested." Nor were the next. I was in Leicester two days before I managed to get an interview with the first big firm which offered me the use of some hundreds of branches, and agreed to supply all boots at 25 per cent discount.

This same manufacturer was good enough to show me how far his organisation covered the country, and to suggest other firms possessing branches in districts which he could not reach. With his introductions I was able, before leaving Leicester, roughly to complete an organisation which would bring our free boots within five miles of every applicant—with the exception of those living in London. None of the firms who had agreed to help me had anything like a complete chain of shops in the capital.

The problem of the metropolis was solved for me on the day I returned to the office. Waiting there was a one-armed ex-soldier who had been invalided out of the Army and had established a small boot-shop in the Blackfriars Road.

"I've read about your Boot Fund," he said, "and

The Autobiography of a Journalist

I want to help you if I can, for the sake of the pals I left out there ”

There and then, the proprietor of that one-man business, who had received no honours for “ patriotic services ” and had no thousands tucked away in War Loan, offered to buy, supply and fit as many pairs of boots as I liked without a farthing profit to himself.

“ I haven’t any capital,” he said. “ All my gratuity has gone in the shop. But let me buy the boots as cheap as I can and send you the invoices. Then you can check them and pay them direct.”

I pointed out that London was a big place and it would probably mean a lot of work for one man to undertake without payment. But he would not agree to my suggestion that we should pay him 10 per cent above cost price.

That one-armed ex-service man supplied practically every pair of boots distributed in the London area from his one small shop. We visited the wholesalers together and he showed me how to save a shilling here, another there. He was as enthusiastic as I was to make the funds spread over as many pairs of boots as possible.

For two months he must have devoted half his time to entirely unpaid work for the Fund. Over and over again he refused to accept a halfpenny, and it was only when the Fund had been wound up that I induced him to accept a cheque for five guineas specially granted to him by the firm as a slight recognition for the assistance he had given to us.

It is against my nature to be bitter, but I cannot help contrasting the devotion, the time and the labour so cheerfully provided by that working man with the wealthy and patriotic manufacturer at

More Adventures in Journalism

Leicester who offered me 5 per cent and regarded the scheme as "too much trouble."

Having got the machinery working, I began to pour out boots to deserving cases. We weeded out a few frauds, but all but a fraction of the pitiable letters we received were genuine.

I wish there had been more faked applications, for in the end my money was exhausted before I could supply half the number of boots required. Indeed, it was more than exhausted. When the last account had been received and paid, I found we had an over-draft at the bank of nearly five hundred pounds. It was not possible to repeat the appeal for funds in the paper, and so once again the firm came to the rescue, and made good the deficit.

They did more than that. When it became obvious that, through no fault of mine, the process of winding up the fund and completing a proper record of every transaction would mean some one working until midnight every evening for the next twelve months, they ordered me to hand over the whole organisation to an outside firm, who dealt with the balance of the correspondence and prepared accounts for an agreed fee.

Thus ended the one and only public appeal for funds which I have ever sponsored in a newspaper. It was an interesting experience which cost me, indirectly, a lot of money, for while I was grappling from morning to night with the avalanche of letters which descended upon my head, I was unable to write anything beyond necessary work for my own newspaper. My income during the nine months I was working on the Fund was nearly three hundred pounds less than during the preceding nine months. I did

The Autobiography of a Journalist

not mind that, but the sheer impossibility of circumscribing in any way the response to my appeal worried me, and the fact that all my colleagues put in hundreds of hours' work apiece in an effort to keep things up to date and save me from the consequences which might have ensued as the result of information laid by applicants who received no replies to their letters did not tend to increase my personal popularity in the office.

While I had been immersed in the details of this journalistic adventure, history was being written in Europe and faithfully recorded every Saturday night in the pages of my paper.

From that fateful August 8th, 1918, the day on which the Allied Armies started their last victorious advance which sometimes paused, but never once stopped, until the signing of the Armistice, every day—and especially every Saturday night—was a time of excitement.

As the British advance developed the days of "there is nothing to report" were forgotten and each week-end the British official *communiqué* supplied us with the sort of scoops that journalists dream about. Towns, hundreds of guns, tens of thousands of prisoners—the tale of captures and victories poured in from hour to hour.

Up there on the "stone" I read each dispatch as it came from the linotype machines and realised I was reading history in the making. If I had never felt the thrill of journalism before, I should have succumbed during those hectic nights when we forsook all time-tables and just poured out edition after edition as the news came along.

And then, at last, came the first hint of the end.

More Adventures in Journalism

It came, as these long-heralded things often do, so quietly that many of the first to read the news missed the importance of it.

We had been warned to expect a peace move by Germany, and in the early hours of a Sunday morning, when the 2.30 edition was safely away and all the staff had left except the editor and myself, I glanced idly at the tape machines which were methodically ticking out the latest news from the Front.

The news message coming through was headed, "Prince Max hints at peace." It was a report of a speech made by the German Chancellor that evening, and as I read the first lines I realised that this was no windy political tirade, but a definite announcement of a peace move which would probably mark the beginning of the end.

The editor was snatching the opportunity of an hour's sleep on a portable camp-bed before the next edition was due. I aroused him and produced the beginning of the message.

He agreed with me. "This is the end," he said, "every word of it must be in the London edition. I'll handle it down here—you stand by upstairs and re-arrange your paper to take two or three columns."

Away I dashed, for time was short, and finding room for three columns at three o'clock in the morning means remodelling all the news pages.

We got three full columns into the 4.30 edition, and when that was away I went downstairs again to find the speech still coming through. There was nothing for it but to remodel the paper again.

All through the night we worked. By five-thirty a special London edition containing six columns of

The Autobiography of a Journalist

the most momentous speech made in any country since the declaration of war was on the machines.

"I reckon we have done as well as anyone," said the editor, as at last we rested over a cigarette and looked over early copies off the machines.

Four hours later, before we parted, we sent out for copies of all our rivals. Then and only then did we realise how well we had done. Our paper was the only Sunday newspaper that morning which gave the complete speech before twelve o'clock. We were on sale by seven and our supplies were cleared out.

Some of our rivals missed the speech altogether, or gave it half a column. Which shows the importance of a news-sense. For before the day was out everyone in London knew that an Armistice and the surrender of Germany were coming at last.

For that scoop, as a partner in its achievement, I received a letter of thanks from the managing-director and an invitation to lunch with him. The letter I still have, the lunch never materialised. Probably the stirring events connected with the flight of the Kaiser and the end of the war drove the memory of the invitation out of his mind.

Immediately following this Peace speech, I was ordered to collect the material for a "Special Peace Number" of the paper. A fortnight later I had sufficient articles on the victory by famous men and women, photographs and drawings by well-known artists to commemorate worthily the greatest moment in the history of my generation.

On November 9th, 1918, we assembled at the office at nine o'clock in the morning. It was known that the terms under which an Armistice would be granted had been decided upon; and the expectation

More Adventures in Journalism

was that an Armistice would be declared not later than Sunday morning. We were determined it should not find us unprepared.

Heartened by our "Prince Max" scoop, we prepared plates for two complete editions of the paper. The first was the "Special Victory Number" and the second an ordinary issue declaring that the Germans had rejected the terms of the Armistice and that the march to Berlin had been resumed.

With these two special issues ready for instant printing—a few copies of each were actually run off—and an ordinary issue catching the usual trains as the day progressed without definite news, we felt that we were prepared for anything that might happen—a sort of "heads I win, tails you lose" feeling that was most comforting.

Alas for our carefully laid plans, and all our hard work! We had anticipated everything except the understanding which existed between all newspapers, through their Association, that Sunday newspapers would not put out special editions, whatever happened, after midnight on Sunday. News coming in after that time was the fair prize of the Monday morning newspapers.

All day on Saturday, all through the night and all the next day, we worked and waited for the news that the war was over. We even stayed on through Sunday night as well, long after the time when we could have put out either of those special editions.

I went home, tired out, after forty-eight hours' continuous duty, and slipped into bed. Two hours later I was awoken by the sound of maroons being discharged and the shrill hooting of tugs on the Thames near by and factories in the neighbourhood.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Peace had come. The nightmare was over. The freedom of the world was saved. As I sat on my bed and heard the first murmurings of the joy-day that was to envelop all London in a mad spasm of delight and relief, I was conscious of only one thought—that if only that news had arrived twelve hours earlier my carefully prepared and profusely illustrated “Special Victory Number” would have been sold out. A moment later, I, too, was out in the street rejoicing. But the metaphorical tear for my unsold edition was shed first.

That “Special Victory Number” never reached the public. The copies which had been printed went straight from the warehouse to the waste-paper merchants—all except one copy which I still treasure as a souvenir of the most exciting week-end of my life.

Outside in the street I forgot I had not been properly to bed for two days and nights, and felt an overwhelming desire to get back to the office I had left less than three hours before.

Fighting my way on to a District train, I got there alive. Fleet Street was a solid mass of people, through which buses and motor-cars—almost unseen beneath cheering clusters—moved slowly or stood still.

It took me twenty minutes to reach Ludgate Circus from Blackfriars Station. At the office I found the whole staff looking down at the sight. They, too, had felt the same urge to celebrate the coming of Peace in the rooms to which had come to us, stage by stage, the news of its advent.

“Now,” remarked the news editor, as he looked down at the surging crowds below, “we shall have to find real news for the paper. The days when the Government obligingly filled the rag for us are over.

More Adventures in Journalism

Some of you will have to learn journalism." Which is the way of news editors.

We talked over the Peace and what it would mean to Fleet Street until lunch-time. Then we all fought our way to the Press Restaurant, and there lingered over our meal and toasted the new world in Chianti.

CHAPTER VII

NEWS-HUNTING—AND A NEW DEPARTURE

THE first weeks of peace were occupied with changing over to the new conditions. Ever since my entry into Fleet Street every idea, every article, every feature practically, had borne the stamp of the war mentality. Now the war was over and all that had gone before was out of date.

It is in times like this, when mentally the whole paper is in the melting-pot, that the habit of quick decisions and the ability to reshape thought to meet a new situation is of the utmost value to the journalist. The news editor who has been suddenly faced at midnight with a piece of news on a subject about which he knows nothing, but which must be dealt with within a matter of minutes, will know what I mean. Almost before the echoes of the last guns had died away in Flanders, the khaki election was upon us. Under the new Representation of the People Act all the elections were held on the same Saturday, which meant an enlarged paper and a joy-night for us.

By virtue of my keen interest in politics I was asked to act as assistant to a former Member of Parliament who was to write up the electoral battle from hour to hour as the results came through.

The fact that this man had actually headed the poll at two elections before the war filled me with

News-hunting—and a New Departure

awe, until I discovered that his knowledge of the previous history of most of those standing for constituencies was less than my own. When I found that our "expert" specially engaged for the occasion did not know, without referring to reference books, what was the name of Earl Grey of Fallodon's old seat, or whether Blackburn returned one member or two, I began to appreciate the value of having a "name" in journalism. For his fee for that day's work was, I learnt, fifty guineas, whereas mine worked out at fewer shillings.

There was, however, further humour ahead before we had finished with that election. On account of the increased number of pages, it was not possible to place all of them on the stone. Two pages of election results had to be handled on movable trolleys, from which it was planned, after they had been got ready for press and the type screwed in tight, to lift them on to the main "stone" and so through into the foundry.

To minimise the task of setting over six hundred results during one night, the names of the constituencies and candidates had been set up earlier in the week, with "slots" left for the votes polled to be inserted in movable type. I had been nervous about this arrangement, owing to the danger of the type falling out when these two extra pages were lifted on to the main "stone." But the foreman assured me that all would be well.

By midnight the results were coming through thick and fast, and we of the editorial staff were congratulating ourselves on having every result through before the stroke of midnight safely into the edition due away half an hour later, when the disaster happened.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

The main pages having gone safely to the foundry, two compositors, having first screwed up one of the odd pages on the trolleys tightly and tested the type to see that it held fast, lifted the page on to the stone a matter of six inches distant. That six inches meant the ruin of all our plans, for as the page was lifted all the carefully compiled results remained behind, standing up on the surface of the trolley like little regiments of soldiers.

It was then twelve twenty-five, and we had five minutes to get through unless the whole Northern edition was to miss its trains. Every man in the place got to work, and those little heaps of movable type which represented the results of some eighty hotly fought elections were pushed back into the page.

Some of them got in the right place. Most of them didn't. But we could not wait for any check. The page just had to go. And so did the second page when, of course, the same thing happened. I have often wondered what our Northern readers thought when in their paper the following morning they found in one case that a Communist polling 22,000 odd votes had beaten a Liberal polling 823 by 4515 ! There might be many explanations of such a phenomenon, but no one not in that composing department during the fatal half-hour could have solved the mystery, made the more mysterious because while four pages of results were all perfectly accurate, two of them looked like the work of a prize lunatic who had run amok.

It was shortly after this *contretemps* that the literary editor resigned his post and I was promoted to his place. I must have been the cheapest "literary

News-hunting—and a New Departure

editor " ever known to Fleet Street, for over a period of five months I not only secured four or five signed articles upon topical subjects every week, but I was also " editing " a page of pictures in each issue, and during part of the time I had to conduct a woman's page suddenly left staffless through the resignation in a fit of " temperament " of the woman journalist responsible. If for all this labour I was still paid only six pounds a week I did not complain. For it was wonderful training. Coupled with my Saturday nights up on the " stone " it meant I was getting experience of articles, reporting, pictures, features and putting a paper to press, all at the same time.

The sudden thrusting of the woman's page upon me late one Thursday night, without any warning, led to an amusing incident which greatly tickled the rest of the staff. It had been the practice of the woman journalist concerned to propose each week some problem-question in her page, and offer two prizes of half a guinea for a reply.

After racking my brains for a possible subject at short notice, I hit upon the idea of running a little competition on the question, " If you met Elizabeth, what would you say to her ? "—Elizabeth being the name under which the page was run. On Tuesday morning, when the entries began to roll up, I found that of the first dozen I opened, over half dealt with matters which did not, to say the least, come within the ordinary purview of a young and unmarried sub-editor. Blushing profusely, I sought the aid of the editor's lady secretary. She handled that correspondence for me, and informed all and sundry in the office that out of four hundred odd entries, over

The Autobiography of a Journalist

a dozen ladies had been kind enough to ask "Elizabeth" to spend a week-end with them, the better to discuss their problem. I have often wondered what those good readers would have said had I taken any of them at their word.

The eternal quest for suitable subjects for signed articles, and the task of fitting subjects to possible writers, occupied most of my time during the spring of 1919.

It was about this time that Edward Bok, the famous editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, had come to London for a visit, and in a letter to a newspaper, or an interview, I forget which, made some disparaging remarks about the conditions of the streets of London at that time which, according to the American editor, "constituted a grave moral danger to the American lads who had come to Europe to save the world," or words to that effect.

The editor of my paper handed the subject over to me and asked me to get at the truth. Thus I began a campaign which brought me into touch with a number of interesting people, including Bok himself, Sir Francis Lloyd, then Officer Commanding the London District, the first Chief of the Women Police, and many other social reformers.

I was the first journalist to talk with Dr. Miloukov, Foreign Minister of Russia during the Kerensky Government, with whom I had tea and a two hours' talk about the future of Europe on the afternoon that he reached London in exile.

M. Kerensky himself told me (in a South Kensington boarding-house) the story of the rise and fall of his Provisional Government, and I spent a week-end at a Hastings hotel with Professor Masaryk, the first and

News-hunting—and a New Departure

present President of Czecho-Slovakia, and the lieutenants who had fought with him a long and bitter struggle for the independence and recognition of their country as an independent State.

As the statesmen of the world collected in Paris and London to fashion the Peace, so I met most of them and learned something of their hopes and ambitions at first hand. I mention the fact to show how closely even an unknown journalist gets to the birth of history by virtue of his calling. Never before or since have I met so many brilliant men as I did during the first six months of peace. Had I not been a journalist I should never have met them at all.

As the weeks passed the demand grew for new topics concerned with the new world in which we found ourselves. Less and less could I fill the space reserved for my special features by telephoning an Embassy or Legation and making an appointment to meet some man suddenly thrown into prominence through the Peace Conference.

The first article dealing with an after-war problem which I published was, I remember, a forecast—and a remarkably accurate one—on the future of the housing problem signed by dear old Will Crooks, perhaps the most beloved figure in the Labour movement.

I remember calling at his modest dwelling at nine o'clock one morning to find Crooks in his shirt-sleeves, sitting in the parlour which opened directly on to the street. He was opening letters while Mrs. Crooks scolded him for letting his breakfast get cold.

When I had handed him my card, he swept the letters on one side and invited me to sit down and share the bacon and eggs.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

"I have had breakfast," I answered.

"Never mind about that," he answered cheerily.
"Two breakfasts never hurt any man."

For over an hour I talked with him, while Mrs. Crooks watched over the interview with the pride of a wife who knows the worth of her man. I took away with me the memory of a couple who, scorning riches and even what many people would regard as comfort, were nevertheless richer than most people in real happiness.

Two hours later the scene in which I found myself had been transformed in startling fashion. From that simple Thames-side home of the Crooks's, I had gone straight to Selfridge's, where I had an appointment with Mr. Gordon Selfridge to get his views on the desirability, or otherwise, of increasing the salary paid to our Prime Ministers—then as now agitating the public mind.

I found the directing genius of the great department store seated at a massive desk which enclosed him on three sides. To his right sat a stenographer taking down letters. In front of him stood a departmental manager settling some point of business. I was motioned to a seat on the left. Thus Mr. Selfridge demonstrated that one man could attend to three matters simultaneously. In between sorting out correspondence from a pile before him and listening to the manager, he jerked out words and phrases in my direction. I put them on paper, and when he began dictating letters again, seized the opportunity to arrange them into some sort of sequence. Then I wrote them out and handed them to him to sign. He read and signed the article without ceasing to dictate letters. It was nerve-racking, the way in

News-hunting—and a New Departure

which he exploded ideas like a gun. I left that room comparing the office with the peace of Will Crooks's home. It did not seem possible that any man could be as busy as that for long and keep sane, just as one could not imagine anything happening to disturb the serenity of the Labour "agitator" who was surely the most kindly and good-natured man who ever rose to prominence.

Shortly after the end of the war a change of editorship occurred, and the man under whom I had worked ever since selling my first series of articles was replaced by a news editor who had previously acted in the same capacity to a prominent weekly newspaper at Manchester.

The new editor was a good fellow, equipped with an endless fund of stories, all libellous, relating to the climate of Manchester. I remember him particularly by two incidents. The first was when he attempted to introduce what he declared to be the authentic "big circulation" note into an issue by devoting the "splash" story to a particularly horrible story from Russia. I do not recollect what effect that story had upon our circulation, but I do remember the hubbub which resulted when, a day later, it was discovered that because of it we had lost over half our high-class drapery advertising. Which only shows that there are many interests and factors to be considered before deciding to change the "tone" of an established journal.

The second incident was a story still told against myself. Making up the paper on the "stone" one night I came across a piece of news set up which did not seem to fit in with the general policy of our paper. Before putting it into one of the news pages,

The Autobiography of a Journalist

therefore, I took a proof downstairs and asked the editor why we were printing it.

He adjusted his spectacles precariously on to the tip of his nose, and looked at me more in sorrow than in anger.

"If you are going to ask me *why* we print things," he said, "we shall never get out a paper at all."

He went on to explain, in the same ironic vein, that he did not agree with anything that went in the paper, or any other paper, but that 500,000 people liked our stuff and that was the end of it. Did I propose to doubt the intelligence of our readers?

Further changes in our staff reminded me that in Fleet Street the safest job is not too sure, and I began to cultivate a free-lance connection again in my spare time. I wrote anything and everything, from short topical articles for the weeklies, to specialist articles on business and success for the business magazines, and articles on health and other topics for the magazines.

One day I heard through a colleague that a business magazine was looking for a motoring correspondent who could write expertly upon commercial transport. Here was another opportunity. Carefully I explained that commercial transport was my hobby, and the following day I sought out the editor of the magazine armed with a letter of introduction.

I had guessed he would not know any more about the subject than I did, and it was so.

Half an hour later I left his office with an understanding that I was to write a first article of four thousand words entitled "The Right and the Wrong Way of Organising a Motor Transport Fleet." If

News-hunting—and a New Departure

this article were approved I was to receive a definite commission for five more to complete the series. And the rate of payment was to be four guineas per thousand words.

This was wealth untold—the sort of thing one dreamed about. All that remained was to learn something about commercial transport, a subject which I now realised I had neglected for too long.

That very evening I ransacked the second-hand bookshops in the Charing Cross Road. My luck was certainly in, for at one I found a weighty tome of some five hundred pages, published in America, and dealing in encyclopædic fashion with every problem of business transport which had ever arisen in the activities of some of the largest firms in the United States.

Joyfully I paid ten shillings for it, and set to work to make myself an expert on the “snags” incidental to running a transport fleet. It was stiff reading, but by the time I came to the end of that book I could at least talk and write about lorries and their upkeep with superficial knowledge.

The next step was to obtain information if possible at the fountain-head regarding British conditions. To this end I approached one of the biggest London department stores, a firm employing some hundreds of delivery vans, and secured an introduction to their transport expert.

Fortunately he proved to be an enthusiast, with a mania for keeping statistics, and so great was his joy to meet a writer who intended to write a whole series of articles upon his pet subject that he poured statistics upon me, pointing out how each set of figures represented mistakes or improvements in the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

organisation which he controlled. He even took me out to dinner one night and insisted on drafting half my first article on the spot.

He could not write two consecutive sentences, but I realised that the information he was giving me was what I might have sought for years without obtaining. It was the whole intricate and highly efficient transport system of one of the largest commercial motor users in Great Britain laid bare for my benefit.

After that I was not surprised to learn from the editor that my first article was considered the best article on the subject which the magazine had ever printed, and I was forthwith promoted to be their "motoring correspondent."

When once a journalist settles down to concentrate upon one particular subject, it not infrequently happens that his progress is facilitated by a chain of introductions. Each person he interviews tells him a certain amount, and mentions two more who will be able to help him. This is what happened to me over those monthly articles on commercial motoring. My first helpful informant sent me to see another man controlling a large fleet of lorries of a different size and handling different goods—long-distance work. The second man suggested a third who might be able to give me useful figures.

Thus by easy stages I found myself in possession of invaluable detailed knowledge of the financial and organising sides of running commercial motors. My work was not to recommend actual makes of motor vehicles, apart from suggesting weights and types for various classes of goods. What I had to do was to plan an organisation, from the bottom up, for getting

News-hunting—and a New Departure

the maximum results with the minimum of money. In short, what the magazine wanted me to do was to show a big firm how, by increasing the efficiency of their motor fleet, they could save a fraction of a farthing a mile on the costs without any reduction in the efficiency of their service.

Five of those articles were based upon sound advice given me by men who had been facing those problems daily for years. In the sixth and last I rounded off the series by myself preparing a complete costing system, which revealed exactly the given amount of money required to run any type of commercial vehicle, per "ton-mile" of goods carried. This, as the phrase indicates, is a method of measuring the cost of carrying goods by reduction to the terms of one ton, one mile.

Those "ton-miles"! How proud I was of them. This, however, was my one and only attempt to write on the subject. I checked that article from every conceivable angle. It seemed as sound as such a mass of figures could be.

The week it appeared there was forwarded to me from the offices of the magazine a letter addressed to the Motoring Correspondent. It was from the managing-director of one of the greatest business firms in Northern Ireland, and he informed me that he had read my articles with the greatest interest and benefit.

But he went on to say that while I proved that the cost of carrying a certain class of goods in lorries of a certain type, including all charges, should not be more than fivepence per ton-mile, his firm had never been able to reduce that charge below about seven-pence-halfpenny.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

He went on to explain that he had shown my article to his transport manager and requested a report. That official had admitted that my figures baffled him. They seemed sound, yet the fact remained that there was a difference of twopence-halfpenny between their actual costs and my estimate. And the transport manager was certain that no unnecessary waste was going on.

Finally, the letter enquired whether, if the managing-director forwarded to me a complete analysis covering the last two years of their transport costs, I would consent to consider these and then visit Belfast and overhaul their organisation on the spot, for which they offered me a fee of fifty pounds.

That letter worried me for weeks. I spent hours checking my figures to see where I had gone wrong, for I felt certain that it was I who had made a mistake, and the transport manager who was right. I never answered the letter. I could not answer it without exposing my ignorance and letting down the magazine. My mistake remains undiscovered to this day. I know I went wrong somewhere !

While these motoring articles were appearing I tried to develop my free-lance connection in another direction. The literary editor whose place I had taken had established himself in offices in Fleet Street and settled down to write.

I evolved the idea of using his office in the evenings to plan the syndication of articles and features to the British provincial papers in the same way as Edward Bok told me he had worked up a big connection among American newspapers in his early years.

Syndication, it may be explained, consists of splitting the country into areas and selling the same

News-hunting—and a New Departure

article to one paper in each area. To be successful a certain minimum number of newspapers must regularly print the material syndicated, but once that has been arranged, it is obviously possible to supply each paper with stories, articles and features at rates considerably less than the cost of exclusive material.

In that little office, high above Fleet Street, I worked from six until eleven, five nights a week, for a month. In that time I produced specimen features dealing with social gossip, gardening, sport, films, theatres, politics and the sort of light philosophy which has since become known as "Tonic talks."

These I sent, with a carefully worded letter, to some four hundred provincial papers, intimating that they could have the use of any of the features, each of which was about one thousand words in length, within their area and twenty miles around, for prices ranging from five shillings to seven shillings and sixpence.

The letters all posted, I settled down to await results. My news editor warned me that British papers had never taken kindly to the syndication idea, apart from church magazines, but I was not prepared for the "frost" which resulted from all my industry.

One remote weekly in Westmorland booked an order for the gardening column at five shillings a week. And a paper somewhere in the Midlands wrote stating that they might be prepared to consider a sporting column when they had seen more of it. The rest was silence.

There was nothing to be done but write to the two papers concerned and explain quite frankly that the idea had misfired, which I did.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

The explanation was simple. The provincial Press was not then ripe for syndication on any extended scale. The "small town" editor had been accustomed to buy his serials, and a few of his article-features, through a syndicate. But most of them relied upon their reporters to fill the papers.

Since that attempt of mine to launch the syndication of half a dozen features and signed articles, other syndicates have sprung up. Some of them are the British offices of American syndicates which handle big names and do big business. Others are British syndicates which have had better luck than I did. Not a few of them submit every week syndicated material both from America and this country to me as an editor, though the papers which I control never publish anything but exclusive features, in common with most London dailies and weeklies. But I never glance over a batch of roncoed copy sent out by these syndicates without thinking of those evenings which I spent as a pioneer in syndication.

I realise now, when I am too busy to repeat the experiment, that what I should have done was to speculate more boldly. To have paid a few pounds out in fees for names which would have attracted the provincial editor would probably have turned the scale. Then, having established business relations, I might have attracted support for the more hackneyed features which I sent out.

The failure of this attempt at syndication made me redouble my free-lancing activities, for although the Peace was only a few weeks old, Fleet Street was already alive with rumours of changes to come. And at such times the wise staff journalist fosters carefully his second string.

News-hunting—and a New Departure

I have heard experienced journalists declare that no man should adopt journalism as a career unless he can write, and sell what he writes, in addition to qualifying for, and filling a staff job. And all my experience leads me to agree with that statement. The journalist who can turn out saleable articles, features or fiction, has at least his own brain and imagination between himself and starvation if his job fails, whereas the man who is a sub-editor, or news editor and nothing more, is forced in the event of unemployment to live on his savings, if any, until something turns up.

It is this failure in all-round ability which has been responsible for many of the Fleet Street failures. Over and over again I have had efficient newspaper and magazine men, even editors, come to me and beg for any sort of job. Usually there was not one going, and when I offered them the chance of contributing to my papers, they sorrowfully admitted that "they never wrote." Apart from considerations of bread and butter in emergency, the man who can write as well as edit, and who has a certain nucleus of a market for his wares, possesses a comfortable feeling of independence unknown to the staff man who would be lost without his pay envelope.

In my own case rumours that the directors were not altogether satisfied with the results obtained did not worry me overmuch. I was managing to earn over five pounds a week in my spare time, and if necessary I could live on that, apart from any increase in output which could reasonably be anticipated if I devoted my whole time to free-lancing.

Actually I took myself the first step towards severing my connection with my first paper. My original

The Autobiography of a Journalist

editor, who after leaving us had gone to a group of magazines, invited me to join him as his chief assistant. It was a chance to break fresh ground, for until then I had never handled fiction, nor had I had experience of magazine work, apart from contributing occasional articles.

In the position offered to me I should be gaining experience of both these new fields, in addition to handling a certain amount of publicity work in which my old editor was kind enough to think that my stock of bright ideas would be useful.

He offered me a salary of nine pounds a week, which was considerably more than I was being paid on the newspaper. But it was the thought of rejoining my old chief which was the real attraction—that and the chance of gaining fresh experience. I interviewed the editor of my paper and told him I was leaving. He was very nice about it, and asked me if I would consent to continue to see the paper to bed on Saturday nights.

Saturday nights on the "stone" were a weekly adventure to which I still looked forward. I enjoyed every minute of those hours spent in saving minutes and getting page after page into the foundry. To be paid two guineas a week for doing something which was a pleasure was an unexpected piece of good luck, and I agreed to the suggestion on the spot. I had been on the staff of that Sunday paper just over twelve epic months; when I left to take up my new work. For another year I continued to put seven editions to press every Saturday night, leaving my work at midday on Saturday and after a hurried lunch dashing off to the newspaper, there to work the clock round and go home by the first train on Sunday

News-hunting—and a New Departure

morning. And when at last my Saturday night shift stopped, due to changes introduced in the paper after a certain politician, since notorious, had secured a large interest in it, I felt like a duck out of water every time a Saturday came round and found me free to visit a theatre or play a rubber of bridge like a normal being.

The change took me into a new world, peopled by famous authors, film stars, music publishers, actresses and printers. It was my twin task to produce a weekly film paper and provide publicity for certain clients of that branch of the new business, while my chief was handling two new magazines and a weekly woman's paper.

Had the firm for which we were working been capable of building up an organisation such as Newnes and Northcliffe had created, that job might have been a stepping-stone to a spectacular success. As it was, with constant battles with printers unaccustomed to the work they were handling on the one hand, and directors with no experience of magazines on the other, it meant working eighteen hours a day with never a minute to think of keeping touch with the free-lance connection I had laboriously built up.

If we had been left alone to see our issues through it would not have been so bad, but when on top of catching the midnight train for Brighton, where I then lived, three nights a week, I had to face directors who suddenly turned up at the printing works just as I was at last going to press and censored whole articles, I began to realise the wisdom of those journalists who will tell you that good working conditions and sympathetic understanding from above are worth another two hundred pounds to anyone.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

For the six months after beginning the new adventure I worked harder than ever before or since. Although it was a case of doing four jobs at once, I will not pretend that the struggle to cram two weeks' work into one was not exhilarating. I at any rate enjoyed it.

In the first place I had to produce a complete weekly film paper, with a certain amount of help from my chief. Then I had to give a considerable amount of time to clients who paid us to secure publicity for them. These included famous authors, composers, aircraft firms, actresses, theatrical producers, publishers. I would be planning an aerial stunt in the morning, passing pages of the film paper in the afternoon and writing articles in an actress's dressing-room at a West End theatre in the evening.

One interesting week I spent living at the Piccadilly Hotel, where one of our clients had a suite of rooms. I had to write his life-story for a weekly paper, and as all the time he could give me was between midnight and two in the morning, he suggested that I stayed at the hotel for a few days in order to be on the spot.

That man, who is one of the most invigorating personalities it has ever been my good fortune to meet, literally carried out the favourite music-hall joke in real life by dictating chunks of his life-story to me while in his bath.

Much of the publicity work which we handled consisted of securing Press notices for new plays. It was interesting work which enabled me for three months to watch play after play progressing from the earliest stages until I was given a box from which to view the finished result on the opening night.

News-hunting—and a New Departure

I felt, as most people do, the queer attraction of theatrical life. The alfresco suppers behind the scenes after the shows were a joy. And the freedom to walk into any one of a dozen shows without paying for seats enabled me to retain for a few months longer a useful Press privilege.

It was a colourful existence which taught me a lot. During those months I came into contact with the fiction market and learnt the rudiments of judging a good story. I bought my first serials. I wrote articles, possessing a publicity value not always apparent to lynx-eyed news editors, for nearly every daily and weekly paper in London.

Writing publicity articles became an art when the first news editor decided not to give free publicity to every one who wanted it. As it has become more and more difficult to get a "puff" for anyone or anything into the editorial columns of a newspaper, so the ability of the publicity agent had to develop if he were to continue to earn his money.

I knew several of the news editors to whom my stuff regularly went, and it amused me to think out news stories which would contain too tempting a news value to be relegated to the waste-paper basket. That we did not altogether fail in our object is shown by the fact that I received an offer from a famous West End hotel to undertake their publicity for them, with living *de luxe* thrown in as an attraction additional to a tempting salary.

By this time, however, I realised how fatally easy it is to slip from journalism into publicity, which is generally regarded (quite unfairly, I think, if it is efficiently handled) as bastard journalism. And how difficult to climb back! So the offer was refused.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

I still retained my early dream of using my days to produce papers and books, and to side-track myself into publicity work would have meant too great a sacrifice. There are publicity men in Fleet Street to-day, representing great firms, big theatres, or several interests at once, whose work and salaries are both equal to the best in Fleet Street. But once a publicity man, always one. I have known news editors leave their papers to accept tempting offers from big firms. I can call to mind now one that meant a salary of five thousand pounds a year, which is more than any news editor ever received. But I cannot recall any publicity man who has "come back." If you would become a serious journalist, therefore, with a standing among your confrères, avoid publicity as you would a plague.

Though I turned down the offer made to me, I speedily became dissatisfied with the work I was doing. I was once more performing the trick of burning the candle at both ends, and on this occasion not for my own profit, but to benefit a firm which was not famous for gratitude.

I decided that my best course was to cut free from publicity and get both a holiday and back to journalism at the same time. The fact that my editor was also regarding the game as hardly worth the candle told me that a change would in any case not be long delayed.

The question was—what should I do next? I talked it over with the news editor of my old paper, and he reminded me that I had many times expressed a wish to visit New York.

"They are settling down to the first moves in this year's Presidential election," he said. "Why not go

News-hunting—and a New Departure

over there and send us a special series of articles from Washington?"

This was a new idea, but the more I thought about it the more I liked it. For one thing it meant getting back to "special commissioner" work and probably meeting many interesting figures in American public life. For another it would enable me to gain a knowledge of American problems which I could not get in London. And, as I have observed before, in journalism no knowledge is ever wasted.

I discussed the suggestion with the editor of my old paper. He was quite prepared to contribute to such a trip in return for a weekly article for three months, but naturally he could not pay enough for these to clear my expenses, especially as hotel life in New York was atrociously expensive just after the Armistice.

The solution, obviously, was to cross the Atlantic with three or four strings to my bow. To this end, when informing the editor of my intention to resign, I suggested I should make a tour of the film studios in the Eastern States for the film paper which I had helped to found. I quoted him £50 for as many special interviews, signed articles and exclusive photographs as I could get. This was agreed to, and a day or two later I was asked by a firm of publishers to call on the New York publishers on their behalf for a further fee of £30 towards my expenses. One or two other odd commissions came to me from papers for which I had written in the past, and when I totalled it all up I found that I was to receive just over £250 for three months' work, apart from any odd sums I might make while in America.

This amount meant that after paying my first class fare to New York and back I had something

The Autobiography of a Journalist

like £15 a week on which to live and move about during eleven weeks ashore in America, which I judged to be sufficient, with care, to see me through.

Once again I made a mistake through inexperience. Had I taken the precaution to consult one of the American correspondents in London before quoting round sums to the firms whose business I was to transact I should have learned that a modest week's bill at the Manhattan Hotel, where I proposed to make my head-quarters when I was not in Washington, would more than swallow up my £15, without allowing a farthing for fares, stamps, stationery, cables, entertaining and the thousand and one expenses which must be faced when one is representing a newspaper abroad.

Fortunately for my peace of mind I did not know that then. So there was not a single cloud in my journalistic sky when, one February morning in 1920, I stood on the deck of the *Mauretania* and watched the docks at Southampton slipping back into the old world I had left behind. Already, I told myself, I had progressed from writing in a village attic articles that were always rejected to going across the world as the special American correspondent of a great Sunday newspaper. If one could accomplish so much in under five years, what might an enthusiastic young man not do in the next ten?

I watched the Isle of Wight slipping by and then made my way to the smoke-room. There, I thought, I might meet some one conversant with political America who could tell me some of the things I was going across the Atlantic to find out. Or I might perchance find myself a fellow-voyager with Mr.

News-hunting—and a New Departure

Hearst, or one of his editors, and get the offer of an editorship on one of his dailies.

The United States was the world's richest country. I determined not to let any chance slip of making my fortune before the end of my latest adventure.

CHAPTER VIII

INTERVIEWING AMERICA

I HAD pictured my landing at New York, armed with the credentials of a London newspaper, as the supreme moment of my career. Actually it was nothing of the sort, for, mainly owing to my being thoroughly out of condition after long hours and having had little sleep for some months, I contracted a diphtheric throat on board the *Mauretania*, and it was a very woebegone correspondent, unable to speak or eat, who dragged his weary limbs down the gangway one Saturday afternoon, and fell into a taxi which carried him through snowbound streets to the comfortable seclusion of a bedroom at the Manhattan Hotel.

The first Americans whom I interviewed (or rather, who interviewed me) were three doctors. They further disturbed my peace of mind by discussing the possibility of diphtheria. If that diagnosis proved correct, I saw my mission to America ending ingloriously with some weeks in a State infirmary and, my money gone, deportation as an undesirable alien at the end of it.

Fortunately, under the administrations of these men, the throat yielded to treatment, and after a week in bed and the expenditure of thirty pounds which I could not afford, I was able to think about the work I had to do.

Interviewing America

My first job was to get into touch with the Republican and Democratic head-quarters, which were then engaged in selecting their candidates for the forthcoming election.

After talking with some of the "bosses" and sounding representative Americans, I cabled my first message back to London. In it I "tipped" Calvin Coolidge for the Republican Presidential nomination, with Hoover as the "dark horse." For the Democratic ticket I suggested MacAdoo, Woodrow Wilson's son-in-law, as the most probable choice.

I was wrong about the Democrats, but not so far out in my forecast of the Republican choice, for Coolidge was, as the world knows, chosen as Vice-President, and became the President after the death of Harding. Hoover, whose managers had their headquarters in the hotel where I was staying, was an "also ran" in that campaign, but the strength of his position with "big business" was shown by subsequent events.

Later, I went to Washington and met many American legislators with whom I discussed prohibition —then only a few months old and still the biggest experiment ever made by a great nation—trade, labour conditions, inter-Allied debts and other subjects.

In six weeks I managed to make a general survey of the mind of America upon all the questions then agitating the public on both sides of the Atlantic. What I learned went back to England in a steady stream of articles. In addition to my weekly article for my late paper, I contributed a series of articles on American politics to a weekly sixpenny review, a number of cables to a London evening newspaper

CHAPTER VIII

INTERVIEWING AMERICA

I HAD pictured my landing at New York, armed with the credentials of a London newspaper, as the supreme moment of my career. Actually it was nothing of the sort, for, mainly owing to my being thoroughly out of condition after long hours and having had little sleep for some months, I contracted a diphtheric throat on board the *Mauretania*, and it was a very woebegone correspondent, unable to speak or eat, who dragged his weary limbs down the gangway one Saturday afternoon, and fell into a taxi which carried him through snowbound streets to the comfortable seclusion of a bedroom at the Manhattan Hotel.

The first Americans whom I interviewed (or rather, who interviewed me) were three doctors. They further disturbed my peace of mind by discussing the possibility of diphtheria. If that diagnosis proved correct, I saw my mission to America ending ingloriously with some weeks in a State infirmary and, my money gone, deportation as an undesirable alien at the end of it.

Fortunately, under the administrations of these men, the throat yielded to treatment, and after a week in bed and the expenditure of thirty pounds which I could not afford, I was able to think about the work I had to do.

Interviewing America

My first job was to get into touch with the Republican and Democratic head-quarters, which were then engaged in selecting their candidates for the forthcoming election.

After talking with some of the "bosses" and sounding representative Americans, I cabled my first message back to London. In it I "tipped" Calvin Coolidge for the Republican Presidential nomination, with Hoover as the "dark horse." For the Democratic ticket I suggested MacAdoo, Woodrow Wilson's son-in-law, as the most probable choice.

I was wrong about the Democrats, but not so far out in my forecast of the Republican choice, for Coolidge was, as the world knows, chosen as Vice-President, and became the President after the death of Harding. Hoover, whose managers had their head-quarters in the hotel where I was staying, was an "also ran" in that campaign, but the strength of his position with "big business" was shown by subsequent events.

Later, I went to Washington and met many American legislators with whom I discussed prohibition —then only a few months old and still the biggest experiment ever made by a great nation—trade, labour conditions, inter-Allied debts and other subjects.

In six weeks I managed to make a general survey of the mind of America upon all the questions then agitating the public on both sides of the Atlantic. What I learned went back to England in a steady stream of articles. In addition to my weekly article for my late paper, I contributed a series of articles on American politics to a weekly sixpenny review, a number of cables to a London evening newspaper

The Autobiography of a Journalist

and some dozens of specialised articles dealing with trade, shipping and labour conditions to various papers interested in those subjects.

Once again I verified the fact that anything that is news can be sold somewhere. I dined one night with a prominent American shipping magnate, who talked at length about the position of United States shipping following the war. I took a careful note of what he told me about the difficulties which America was facing in finding work for her greatly enlarged mercantile marine, and upon my return to London sold a series of articles on the subject to a South Wales daily paper which aroused considerable interest in Cardiff.

I studied—indeed, one could not miss—the growth of national sentiment in the States following the war. In the poorer districts of New York I saw on sale badges inscribed “A.E.F. (American Expeditionary Force—After England Failed).” Everywhere I found signs of a nation suffering badly from “swelled head.” The facts, stated dispassionately, formed an enlightening article for a weekly review. Famous Americans whom I met afforded the material for a series of character studies.

From first to last I wrote over a hundred articles dealing with various aspects of American life.

After gathering this material, I began a tour of the Eastern film studios. This was the most interesting of all my experiences in the New World. To meet the stars whom, in common with millions, I had admired upon the screen, to compare them as they were with what I had expected, was alone worth the journey. And here let me say that never before or

Interviewing America

since have I experienced such hospitality as I found awaiting me in American film-land.

The first man I interviewed was the millionaire head of the second largest picture corporation in the States. I asked for facilities to meet all the famous players who were then working for his company in and around New York. The reply was to carry me off to lunch at New York's most famous hotel while arrangements were being made. After the meal I discovered that the "arrangements" consisted of appointing the manager of the publicity department as my aide-de-camp during my stay in New York, the placing of a furnished office at my disposal complete with stenographer, and instructions for a saloon car, complete with driver, to be at my disposal all day and every day until I returned to London.

"The car will call at the Manhattan each morning at nine," said my host. "If you don't want him send him away. If you do, keep him as long as you like."

Now it was quite true that the company hoped to receive a certain amount of publicity for its stars when I returned, but that does not detract in the least from the warmth of my welcome and the hospitality I received. For the company would have had just the same publicity if they had not thought it necessary to allow me to visit the studios of their rivals in a car they had supplied.

They even went further. Every Saturday morning the publicity manager telephoned me to enquire whether I had made any arrangements for the weekend. If I hadn't, he either suggested a dinner and theatre with him, and perhaps one or two of their stars; or else suggested some motor-run outside New

The Autobiography of a Journalist

York which could be linked up with a Sunday visit to the home of some one of interest in the film world.

The days spent in bed after landing, and the fact that my hotel bill was at least twice as heavy as I had expected, prevented me from visiting California as I had hoped to do. I did not, therefore, meet Mary Pickford or Chaplin. But I met a galaxy of the then famous stars, including the Talmadge Sisters, Dorothy Dalton, Elsie Ferguson, Percy Marmont, Rod la Rocque, Tom Mix and Theda Bara.

I had a wonderful breakfast, served off silver dishes, with Caruso sitting at the next table, in the company of Mary Pickford's manager at the Knickerbocker Hotel. I was the guest of Sam Goldwyn, Jesse Lasky and other "gold bugs" of the film business, and was allowed to see every phase of the giant organisations which they had built up to supply the world with "movies."

In the course of four weeks I interviewed over a hundred famous stars—and was photographed in three different positions with every one of them. Articles, stories, "stills," were rained upon me, so that when I left New York I had to buy a new steamer-trunk to hold all the material and photographs I had collected.

And the stars themselves were as hospitable as the millionaires. It was Percy Marmont who arranged a dinner for me at the Lambs' Club, and his wife who, because I admired the American silks and was too bashful to go shopping in the women's departments of Fifth Avenue for myself, came to New York and did an afternoon's shopping for me. And when I sailed for England it was Rod la Rocque who dashed away from his studio in the middle of shooting

Interviewing America

a scene, in order to shake hands with me on the boat before I left.

It may be said that all these people hoped to get a "boost" as a result of my trip. That may be so. I can only say that never have I received from any British studio a fraction of the courtesy and kindness so freely extended to me in New York.

Having completed my work in films and politics, I settled down to my third mission of interviewing the American publishers, or such of them as had offices in New York. And what a change after the very nasal and brassy atmosphere of the studios. Here I met men who might have been University professors from Cambridge—quiet keen-eyed studious men who knew British writers and their work far better than I did.

I should have enjoyed that last round of visits more than I did but for the fact that my money had gone. I had not been long in New York before I realised that expenses were at least twice as heavy as I had calculated when in London. I might have met this situation by cutting short my visit, but I had already reserved a cabin on a boat leaving eight weeks after my arrival, and owing to the heavy summer bookings for Europe, I could not secure earlier accommodation. Nor could I move to a cheaper hotel, because before arriving, the firms for whom I was doing business had written to all publishers, film companies and newspapers notifying them of my address in New York.

I was forced, therefore, to continue to live at the rate of thirty pounds a week even after the last of the money I had received for the journey had disappeared and when every penny I spent came out of my personal savings.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

The only question which agitated my mind was whether my bank account would last out until the boat sailed for home.

During the last week-end in New York I cabled to my bank for what I judged must be the last thirty pounds in my account. The money should have arrived on Saturday but no reply came.

During those two days I knew what it felt like to be what the newspapers call an "adventurer." I had exactly one dollar and fifty cents in my pocket, together with an unpaid hotel bill for twenty pounds. I ought to have sat in my bedroom waiting for the cable that did not come.

Actually I was living the life of a millionaire. Two film magnates decided to give me a "last grand show." For two days I was carried from one great house to the next, from one banquet to another, in motor-cars so good they must have been British.

The best wines (in spite of Prohibition), the best cigars. Tea with stars whose faces are world-famous, and who talked to me for an hour on end for the simple reason that the men who paid them their fabulous salaries wanted them to do so.

I had the most wonderful week-end of my life and at the end of it I was back in the Manhattan Hotel still possessed of exactly one dollar and fifty cents. And still owing twenty pounds and wondering whether, if the cable did not come, those men who had been so charming to me would trust a strange journalist with real cash instead of just hospitality.

I am glad to record that after all I did not have to ask them. The following morning the money arrived, and the Manhattan people never knew how much the thought of that last account had troubled me.

Interviewing America

I sailed for home the following day. On my way to the boat I called at the offices of the film company which had been so helpful to say good-bye to the publicity man. As I left, he pushed a packet into my hand.

"That's the story version of a new series of crime pictures we are doing," he said. "America's ten most famous crimes, complete with still pictures. They have been written up by one of our best crime men, and you may be able to make some use of them in London. Anyway, take them along with you."

I rammed them into my overcrowded baggage and forgot all about them. In fact, during the twelve days it took the old *Finland* of the Red Star Line to nose her way to Southampton Water, I forgot all about journalism and everything connected with it. It is not possible to do this on land, where every happening has a news value, but at sea, where there are no papers and no news editors, one can really relax. That is probably why so many writers and journalists take to the sea whenever they can escape for three or four weeks from the grindstone of the Press.

I landed at Southampton with enough money for my ticket to London and twelve and sixpence to spare. It had been a near thing, even after throwing all my savings into the scale, and I had a feeling that, financially, at all events, I had not got out of the wood yet. Which proved correct, for when I visited my bank-manager the following day to learn the worst, I discovered that my savings of just over £150 had disappeared and my account was some £10 overdrawn. It was this which had caused delay in cabling the last £30 for which I had asked, and I believe that only

The Autobiography of a Journalist

the fact that the manager was a personal friend of mine prevented me from being thrown into the Tombs Prison in New York.

However, I did not worry unduly, for a certain amount of money was due to me for the articles I had contributed to the weekly review, and before I sailed for New York I had been promised an editorial position with a new firm which was contemplating the issue of two weekly papers.

I reported my return to them the following morning, and learned that they had reconsidered their plans and decided not to embark upon the adventure.

Thus I found myself minus both capital and a job. And in addition to being overdrawn at the bank I owed forty pounds to a man for whom I had promised to transact business in Philadelphia, a promise I had been too busy in New York to keep.

Twelve months before such a state of affairs would have thrown me into a panic, for being unused to handling large sums of money, I still possessed the mentality of the poor, to whom five pounds sounds like a fortune. But adventures in journalism and my visit to America had changed my outlook. I had already written enough while in New York to understand that if only I could squeeze further articles out of my experiences I could put things straight. Acquaintance with men earning ten times my income was teaching me that, given the determination and the ideas, it is as easy in journalism to earn twenty pounds a week as five or ten.

In this frame of mind I settled down to revive my connection as a free lance, and thus restore my vanished fortunes.

It was at this point that, hunting through the

Interviewing America

mass of film material I had brought back, I came across the crime series which had been pushed into my hands during my last five minutes in New York. I read them, and found that they were quite as interesting as the usual run of crime stories, and that in all there was over fifty thousand words of material.

Here was a chance of making money quickly. I took the MSS. to the editor of a film paper which also published fiction features and suggested that they would make a novel series which he could have for twenty pounds, the price to include nearly forty photographs.

Two days later I got them back saying that they were not suitable. There was one more possible market for them. This time I did not mention any price, having decided that even a ten-pound note was too valuable to be refused.

Four days later I received a letter from the editor telling me that he could use the series provided I would accept thirty shillings per thousand words, or seventy-five pounds inclusive of all photographs !

I went to see him and explained that it was not a very good offer, but that I would accept provided he would pay me on acceptance, which he did. Thus by one stroke of fortune I repaid £50 which I owed and provided myself with £25 on which to live while I was getting the wheels turning as a free lance.

I mention this piece of good luck because it illustrates the importance of knowing the right market. Both those editors were right, as I discovered when later on I studied their papers more closely. To the first editor that series was not worth

The Autobiography of a Journalist

a ten-pound note. To the second it was cheap copy at £75. Yet had the first editor accepted the series I should have been at least £55 out of pocket through a single mistake.

It was not easy to settle down to a quiet life and hard work after a millionaire's existence in New York, but it had to be done—and done quickly. I found two rooms in a quiet road in Hampstead, bought a typewriter on the hire-purchase system and began to sort out my ideas and to write anything and everything which promised to supply the wherewithal to live.

Naturally, the first markets I aimed at were the papers for which I had written previously. And here I learned another lesson which shows that in journalism nothing is sure except the cheques in your bank account.

I had hoped to write at least one feature weekly for my old paper. I found that big changes were taking place. A political journalist had secured a large interest in the company and was planning to replace it with a new illustrated weekly. Meanwhile there was little opportunity for me. The film paper for which I had visited the New York studios had been sold to another firm and was on its last legs. Another weekly for which I had written much during the past two years had gone under altogether. In short, I was faced with the necessity to find entirely new markets. This is a common experience in Fleet Street. The writer who is content to confine his work to a small group of papers will discover sooner or later that the number of editors who know his work and take it has dwindled below the line which makes a satisfactory income possible. Only by devoting a certain amount

Interviewing America

of attention every week to exploring new markets can a free lance be sure of continued success. Then as one market disappears, another enters his scheme of things to replace it and the balance is maintained.

This much being obvious, I resolved to neglect no paper that might possibly print the sort of article I could write. In the very first week of free-lancing I turned out about twelve thousand words, including gossip paragraphs for the *Daily Mirror* and other papers, short articles for the weeklies, articles on America for the newspapers and one or two news stories for the Sunday papers. The prices which I received for those articles varied from a guinea per thousand words to five guineas. I did not worry about that. The free lance needs all he can get, and for the quick worker the market at a guinea a thousand may be just as useful in providing his rent and the means to take an occasional "day off" as the remuneration from papers paying a higher rate.

For a few days after beginning to free-lance I had hoped to find a staff job. But conditions in Fleet Street were at their worst. Dozens of men with far more experience than I had were applying for every vacancy. It was a period during which the lucky man was the one who could write.

I heard of only one opening. I was offered a job as political secretary to a large concern, with a salary of £750 and an impressive office. It was tempting just then, but I now realised that to go in for publicity work meant abandoning my real ambitions. Less than a month later that firm was in bankruptcy and two directors were prosecuted! What would have been the position of a young journalist who, at the very beginning of his career, was found to

The Autobiography of a Journalist

be publicity man for a firm already insolvent, I leave the reader to imagine.

That escape taught me there are worse things in the world than being an independent free lance, especially when you have youth and hope. I settled down to earning my living with an added zest.

CHAPTER IX

IN SEARCH OF BREAD AND BUTTER

HAVING been a free-lance journalist myself, and known all the most successful independent writers of this generation, I have come to the conclusion that the really efficient free-lance writer is born and not made. The qualities which the successful free lance must possess are quite distinct from those demanded of the staff man. To many the knowledge that in fair weather and foul they must turn out their quota of articles or stories every week in order to live would be extremely harassing. Others lack the elasticity of mind necessary in order to be able to write for ten or a dozen different markets in a single week.

This is why I doubt the ability of the schools of journalism to turn anyone into a successful writer. If the instinct is there, sound training will develop it, just as by a slower road I developed my own ability in the school of experience. But a man or woman must have ideas, imagination and the ability to write rapidly and fluently, as well as an insatiable appetite for recording facts and impressions upon paper, in order to have any hope of success as a contributor to the Press. All others would be well advised to discount stories of the fortunes to be made "with your pen." Remember that there are some 25,000 people offering their work to editors every

The Autobiography of a Journalist

week. If you consider you can compete successfully with that legion of writers, then by all means put your faith to the test. But if you cannot turn out at least 10,000 saleable words every week of the year, rest assured that free-lance journalism is not for you and seek some less-exacting profession before you waste time and money on a forlorn adventure.

That is the only test I can offer the journalistic aspirant, and I think it is a sound one. For the man who has the spark within him will surely follow his star despite all discouragement. Nothing is surer than that the born journalist will sooner or later, and probably sooner, find in journalism the only completely satisfying career.

It is the only career I know in which one is judged solely by what he accomplishes. If you write enough of the sort of article or story editors want, you are a success. If you don't you fail. There are a few so-called "journalists" with private means who haunt Fleet Street year after year without earning enough to pay their rent, but generally speaking it seems to be truer of journalism than of any other occupation that only the fittest survive.

One must be either a genius or an enthusiast to survive one year of "earning a living by your pen," as the advertisements invitingly put it. For there is more heart-break to be faced in that first year than the average person experiences in a lifetime.

One hears much about rejection slips. But the article that comes home to roost over and over again (and it is usually the article which you consider the best you have ever written) is only the least of the discouragements which the free lance has to face.

There are the editors who hold up your articles

In Search of Bread and Butter

for a year and then lose them, the editors who approve an idea and then return the article which has taken so much preparation. And other editors who commission articles at one price, and pay for it at another and lower figure. If you remonstrate with them, you may get your extra guinea or two, but you risk losing a market.

There are offices in which, you conjecture, your articles are returned unread. And others to which you are allowed to go on wasting postage and stationery in sending quite unsuitable material without a word of guidance.

These things would break the heart of the most determined were there not another side to the picture. Just when things look blackest, you will come across an editor who will actually pay you more than you expected, and perhaps even write informing you that the article was good and he wants more like it.

And there are editors—mostly those who have been “through the mill” themselves and are not spoiled by success—who will take the trouble to write an occasional letter of guidance to the struggling free lance, and even spare him a few minutes in order to tell him what his particular paper does not want.

Such editors are few and far between, and perhaps because of this their kindness is often abused. Every editor has the sort of experience which causes him to vow never to try and help an outside contributor.

Some contributors whom I have tried to help have completely disregarded the fact that I often have to work longer hours than they do in order to get through my week's work. They present themselves at my office on press day, when I shall eat my dinner at nine o'clock if I am lucky, and have the audacity to be

The Autobiography of a Journalist

peceived if I do not instantly put aside pressing work, maybe pages for which the printers are waiting, in order to see them and discuss trivialities.

That is why the successful free lance is nearly always someone of tact, who studies not only the papers for which he writes, but the convenience of the editors with whom he is in contact. An editor appreciates the contributor who writes, or talks, briefly, who shows that he realises every minute of editorial time is valuable, and who, when an article is commissioned or to be considered, gets that article in "on time." So often the free lance who expects every contribution to be read within forty-eight hours of its arrival will think nothing of suggesting an article to an editor, and then going away and shelving it for some more interesting work, oblivious of the fact that the editor may be counting on that contribution for a certain issue.

After which explanation, can anyone blame the average editor if he relies mainly upon known and established contributors on whom experience has proved he can rely implicitly, and relegates to subordinates the job of sorting out the contributions from unknown free lances? For editors, like other human beings, can only do one job at once, and very seldom, among the hundreds of articles which reach the offices of a popular paper every week, is there much worth publishing.

The very fact that most of those who send articles to the papers know very little, if anything, about the requirements of the Press, gives a decided advantage to the free lance who is also an experienced journalist. Even if a staff job is unobtainable, the man who presents himself at an editorial office with a record

In Search of Bread and Butter

of service on a London paper behind him is likely to be listened to with more attention than the man or woman who can show nothing more than a course of training at a school of journalism.

Appreciating this, I began my own free-lancing work at this time by taking advantage of subjects on which I had already written a good deal for my old paper. At the same time I used my mission to New York as the special correspondent of a London newspaper to interest editors of papers which accepted a fair amount of outside contributors in special campaigns which might yield five or six articles instead of one.

I scored my first success in this direction with a series of articles dealing with life in London's Chinatown. I noticed that the more popular papers were constantly publishing articles dealing with "London's dope dens" and other lurid phases of life in Limehouse which had obviously originated in the writers' imagination. It seemed to me that if a trained journalist took the trouble to get the real facts, instead of relying upon a highly coloured imagination, there should be a market for a good many articles on the subject.

Although I did not know it at first, I chose the moment well. The war had been followed by a big revival of gambling among both the white and yellow populations of the East End of London, and not a few of the Orientals were growing rich out of fan tan and pukka-poo. In addition, the Billie Carlton case had shown that the smoking of opium and dealing in drugs were not unknown to the dwellers in Pekin Street and the neighbourhood.

I planned my visits to what the papers were fond

The Autobiography of a Journalist

of calling the "Chinese underworld" with care, for if I were to get beneath the surface it was vital that it should not become known that I was a journalist.

To this end I sought the help of the local secretary of the Seamen's Union, who had been one of my "links" with the East End during my days as a reporter.

Over lunch at an East End public-house I explained that I wanted the help of some one who could take me behind the scenes in the "joints" frequented by seamen and Orientals, and incidentally some one who would be useful if we got mixed up in one of those sudden "flare-ups" which were common enough in places where the dregs of twenty countries met to gamble away their money.

That very afternoon he introduced me to two hefty British seamen, who for five shillings apiece a night offered to pilot me round Chinatown. They were not sailing for three weeks and were only too glad to meet the sort of lunatic who would pay them for visiting the places where the bulk of their last wages had already gone.

Under their expert guidance I "combed" Chinatown of every bit of copy there was to be gathered there. I penetrated to the upper rooms of Chinese laundries which masked the real business of the house—fan tan. In rooms fetid with Lascar, Arab, Malay and white humanity I saw seamen, fresh from their ships, lose £30 and £40 in the course of an hour, and when tempers were strained to breaking-point calmly accept the price of a drink from the little Celestial who sat with a pile of winnings before him and go out peacefully to spend it. In fact, the know-

In Search of Bread and Butter

ledge of human nature revealed by these little yellow men was uncanny.

I went into houses where opium smoking was a nightly pastime, and to which foolish men and women came from the West End, guided by street touts, in search of a fresh sensation.

Clad in old clothes and guided by my two sailors, I saw the machinery of Chinatown working, met the white wives of the yellow men, talked with the proprietors of gaming-houses who admitted that "business was good," heard stories of crimes which I could neither check nor disprove, weird stories which alien sailors from the East discussed as a matter of course but which would have made the ordinary newspaper reader's hair stand on end. I even succeeded in interviewing one of the men—there were then four of them—who are the aristocrats of Chinatown and who finance the whole machinery of opium, drugs and gambling banks.

Having exhausted the possibilities of personal observation I proceeded to obtain an introduction from my acquaintance, the seamen's official, to the chief detective-officer in the district. From him I learned that the authoritites had just begun to "clean up" the district, a development which gave my story a topicality I had not dared to hope for.

The first story of my campaign appeared in the *Globe* and went so well that the editor asked for more. For a fortnight I wrote a column a day exposing the conditions I had seen. At the same time I sold a "splash" news story dealing with other aspects of Chinatown to *Lloyd's Sunday News*, and wrote other accounts for my old paper and several of the weeklies.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

When the police extended their great round-up of those responsible for the gambling I went east again, and elaborated the stories of their activities with further special articles. By this time other London papers were running the Chinatown stuff, but my brother-reporters had come on the scene too late to get the full story. At the first hint of danger the whole district looked suspiciously at any stranger, and had I gone down there a fortnight later than I did, it would have been impossible to get further than the front door of those gaming-houses and opium joints where night after night I had watched the occupants gamble until dawn broke outside their carefully curtained windows.

Having told the full story of Chinatown as I saw it, and described the police "drive" which resulted in over four thousand deportation orders within two months, I wound up my first big story as a free lance by two or three consecutive articles in which I showed that the real remedy, and the only one, was to take action against the owners of the mean houses in slum streets who charged rents sometimes running into hundreds a year, knowing full well that no honest laundry proprietor or marine store dealer could pay them. These owners possessed a definite "vested interest" in the encouragement of vice, which they exploited to the full, sometimes to the extent of putting in "dummy" tenants, who contracted to hand over 50 per cent of the proceeds.

The best story, however, comes to an end in time, and my Chinatown campaign kept me busy for a month, during which time I netted just over fifty pounds. It was not a lot of money for so much work—if I undertook a similar campaign to-day I should

In Search of Bread and Butter

expect to get more. But for an unknown journalist, selling in markets where he had no special "pull," it was not a bad first month's work.

The most valuable source of ideas for the free lance is, of course, the daily papers. Most of the articles appearing in both the Sunday newspapers and the weekly papers and magazines are inspired by items of news appearing in the daily Press. What is discussed in the dailies is topical news, and topicality is the God of Fleet Street.

For a few weeks I tried to place various articles with varying success, and then one day *Lloyd's Sunday News* asked me if I would undertake for them a series of articles, similar to my Chinatown series, dealing authoritatively with the "underworld" of the West End of London.

The resulting series of articles proved even more interesting than those dealing with Chinatown. Re-establishing contact with various social reformers, detectives and private enquiry agents whom I had known during my days as a reporter, I penetrated below the surface of the nightly gaiety in theatre-land, the evening frocks, the painted faces and the dragging steps, to the common tragedy which is daily enacted in our midst.

Here let me say one word about that series of articles, not on my own behalf but on behalf of journalists as a whole. It is commonly said that a journalist will write anything for money. And it is true that I undertook that commission because my bread and butter depended upon it. But having undertaken it, and having realised that those articles were going to be built up of human tragedies and shattered hopes, I wrote each of my articles with

The Autobiography of a Journalist

exceptional care, and made the series a constructive plea, supported by abundant evidence, for certain changes in our street laws which I believed to be a necessary remedy.

My care was not altogether wasted. Shortly after the appearance of the last article the editor of *Lloyd's Sunday News* showed me a letter he had received from a high police official congratulating the paper upon "a helpful and responsible series of proposals dealing with a grave problem."

For some months, following that series, I continued to write one or two articles every week for *Lloyd's*, mostly articles dealing with various aspects of crime.

Crime-writing is for the free lance the line of least resistance. There are more papers wanting original articles dealing with vice and crime than there are markets for any other topic. Because of this there is a tendency for the new-comer to concentrate on crime as an easy and profitable line. It is profitable, but all the same concentration upon it is a mistake if one wishes to become a responsible journalist. For there is something about crime-writing, perhaps due to the class of paper for which one writes, which ties one down to a melodramatic and "cheap" vein that will in time, if subjects are not carefully varied, affect one's style as a whole.

I have nothing to say against the expert criminologist, who studies his subject and writes illuminatingly upon the influence of crime. But for the free lance crime-writing is apt to be a "dead end" unless he is careful to master it before it masters him. For this reason my advice to those who contemplate freelancing is that they should not write anything connected with crime until they have mastered their

In Search of Bread and Butter

subject sufficiently to publish a book dealing with some aspect.

I stress this point because there are to-day many promising free lances churning out fifth-rate stuff about crime and other "scandals" who have within them possibilities which will never be realised unless they are wise enough to make a fresh start. They have learned enough to write to the standard demanded by the cheaper papers upon this one theme and there they have stopped. The wiser among them make a point of striving to improve their markets by devoting some of their time to general articles (which are not so easy to find or to write). The others are in a rut from which they will discover, too late, there is no escape.

If the free lance believes he will develop into an Edgar Wallace, a Charles Kingston or a George Dilnot, then by all means let him confine himself to crime. But this degree of proficiency means an exacting course of study and research, and year by year the field becomes more crowded and competition keener.

Very early in my free-lancing career I realised that crime-writing, like gossip paragraphs, was merely an insidious way of making easy money, and one that was dangerous in view of my desire to widen my field and embrace the whole range of journalism.

With the exception, therefore, of my almost weekly "special" in *Lloyd's Sunday News*, I forsook crime-writing. Nor have I ever returned to it.

In place of it I turned to politics, which had always interested me far more than murders. The articles dealing with American political conditions which I had written after my return from New York had

The Autobiography of a Journalist

introduced my name to certain editors who were interested in political stuff, and I began once again to send them material.

At first I received little beyond further rejection-slips, but here and there I scored a success which encouraged me to go on. It was at this point that a Fleet Street friend, who knew my views on the subject of nationalisation of the basic industries, mentioned to me one day that the coal-owners had established a Press department and were open to consider, and pay for, articles on the subject.

I met their agent, and the result was the beginning of three months' work which took me twice to the South Wales coal-field upon prolonged visits, and resulted in my articles appearing in most of the London newspapers from the *Observer* downwards.

After a talk with the coal-people, I found that most of those writing for them were turning out theoretical stuff dealing with the economics of the situation. I suggested, therefore, that I could help them most by going down to the coal-fields and dealing with the question of nationalisation, then a big political issue—from the human point of view.

It was agreed that I should do so, selling the articles myself and receiving a special fee from the owners in addition to whatever I was paid by newspapers. I had doubts then, and I have greater doubts now, about the ethics of this arrangement, but as I did not intend to write anything which conflicted with my own political views, and as various newspapers had been asking me for articles on the subject, I decided to get to work.

A week spent among the grey squalid villages of the Rhondda was a wonderful experience. I came

In Search of Bread and Butter

back impressed by the wonderful qualities of that mining population, and entirely unconvinced after talks with managers, owners and men, that the nationalising of coal would prove the panacea which the Miners' Federation declared it to be.

I posted my first article to the *Globe* while still in Cardiff, and within a week I had no fewer than eight double-column articles in various papers—clear proof that it pays the free lance to break fresh ground. I found that editors were tired of political articles on the subject and jumped at the chance of contributions which quoted actual conversations on the spot and which they could feature as “By our own Correspondent.” The *Globe* even elevated me to the dignity of their “Special Commissioner.”

For these articles I was paid from five to seven guineas apiece by the newspaper and a further five guineas for each article by the coal-owners—an arrangement which carried my earnings to over forty pounds in the first week and amply compensated me for the expense incurred in going to South Wales.

Spurred on by this success, I returned to the Rhondda and there met and talked with further representative leaders on both sides. When I had finished my own campaign I wrote further articles which the owners placed themselves, in some cases after placing the name of some prominent Minister or ex-Minister at the top of the article.

I recollect one Sunday morning opening the newspapers and discovering three articles I had written, each bearing not the name of the humble author, but that of a prominent public man who, and I say it with all modesty, certainly could not have written that article himself. Then for the first time I found

The Autobiography of a Journalist

myself debating the morality of what Fleet Street men call the "signed article nuisance." A difficult question this, which every journalist must settle for himself. Obviously so long as newspapers prefer articles signed by "names" rather than by competent journalists and are prepared to pay fancy prices for them, no one can blame the free lance who seeks to add to his income by catering for the demand. It is, however, to the credit of journalism that some of the best free-lance journalists of our generation have steadfastly refused to write any article which will not appear under their own names.

During recent years there has been some abatement in the craze for "names," and to-day most papers are prepared to buy and pay reasonable rates for good articles bearing the signature of a competent professional writer. Free lances in general should be grateful for this improvement, due to the stand against the signed article made by journalists themselves. For it is obvious that even when a "signed article" is the work of a journalist and he is adequately paid for securing it, the arrangement by which his own name is suppressed is robbing him of the rightful fruits of his brain, and allowing another to take credit to which he is not entitled.

Incidentally, let me emphasise here once again that the wise journalist who requests a "signature" to an article will safeguard himself by securing on the MS. itself the actual signature of the celebrity whose name is to appear in print.

Even when the journalist has secured a signature on his MS. it may not fully protect him. Since beginning this chapter I have heard of a case in which a prominent free lance secured the approval of a

In Search of Bread and Butter

famous peer to an article, which the noble Lord concerned signed on the first page.

In due course it was published, and challenged, whereupon the peer repudiated it and declared that his name had been used without permission. The reply of the free lance to this mean subterfuge was to produce to the editor concerned the original copy of the article, the first page of which was signed by the peer in his well-known handwriting.

That editor, knowing the ways of Fleet Street and feeling justifiably wrathful that the reputation of a working journalist should be thus threatened by the cowardly attitude of a man who should know better, himself called upon the peer and showed him the signed manuscript, demanding an apology. Whereupon the gentleman in question declared that while the first page of the article was admittedly passed by him, the succeeding pages had been remodelled and altered out of recognition.

The editor was sure of his contributor and was courageous enough to tell the peer he did not believe him. But the moral of that incident is that in order to be protected against mean tricks of this sort a journalist should adopt the usual rule with legal documents and insist that not only is the MS. signed, but also that every page is initialled. A rather awkward request to make to some men and women who would not stoop to such tricks, and who do not appreciate the risks which every free lance or newspaper dealing with "signed articles" has to run.

To return to my free-lance efforts. The most fertile subjects are exhausted in time, and after writing over fifty articles dealing with various aspects of the coal question I found my market—and my

The Autobiography of a Journalist

income—dwindling. The campaign had been very well worth while, however, for it had introduced my work to a number of editors with whom I had not been in contact before.

The *Globe*, especially, after the Chinatown and coal campaigns, were beginning to employ more of my time. It was unfortunate that the paper was then on its last legs, otherwise it is probable that I should have had a further spell as a staff journalist in newspaper-land.

Before it finally ceased publication, to my regret and the regret of many who remembered its palmy days, I carried out one commission for them which may be mentioned here because it deals with descriptive writing, which is journalism at its highest.

This was the "covering" for the paper of the return of the Prince of Wales from his first great Empire tour.

The handling of a big public event such as this is usually entrusted to the senior reporter, or to the news editor himself. Nowadays it is the fashion for some well-known writer to be commissioned for the job. Anyway, it is certain to be "the" story of the day.

In the case of the *Globe* my luck in being asked to cover the event was due to the fact that the paper was running with a skeleton staff and they had no outside man to spare.

It was my first big public event, and important for my reputation as a free lance that it should be successful. The acid test of that would be speed. I should not be able to get away from Victoria Station before noon, and the editor wanted to get the first report of the event on the machines as soon after

In Search of Bread and Butter

one o'clock as possible. That left me very little time to plan my story after fighting my way through the inevitable crowds from Victoria to Wellington Street.

After thinking over the matter I resolved to put a "flying start" to my report by drafting the opening passages the day before. There are certain things which were sure to happen, and if they didn't, well, it was quicker to cut out than to draft an entire story under great pressure.

When I made my way to the elevated stand erected for the Press opposite the spot at which the Prince would step out of the train I had therefore a good thousand-word account of what I expected to see already typewritten and stowed away in my pocket.

It was a memorable scene, which gripped even the most jaded Fleet Street men who saw it. Grouped on either side of the red carpet stood the Prime Minister and all the principal members of the Cabinet, leaders of the Opposition, Field-Marshal, Generals, Admirals. A gallant company of men whose names were known all over the world and whom one rarely has the opportunity of seeing together.

Just before the Royal train steamed round the bend from Vauxhall the Royal Family arrived, heralded by the cheers of the multitude lining the streets outside. I have thought since that morning that one reason why non-journalists so frequently accuse Fleet Street men of being a trifle "cocksure" of themselves may be through a certain habit of mind and speech cultivated by being thus segregated away from the ordinary people upon great occasions. The privileged position a journalist occupies may thus influence him, but I doubt it.

When the train came to a standstill a bronzed

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Prince, dressed in naval uniform, was greeting his father and mother and other members of his family. Not until this personal reunion was over did he turn and shake hands with the Prime Minister, Sir Douglas Haig, Earl Beatty and the other celebrities who were there to honour the Ambassador of Empire.

In a very few minutes the great ones had left and I was outside among the crowd, dodging from pavement to road and from road to pavement along Victoria Street in a desperate effort to save minutes and reach the *Globe* office in time to get my story on the machines.

Luck had been with me, for my imagination had conjured up that scene so vividly that the opening phrases—the most important—of my account could almost stand as they had been written the day before. Even my inevitable phrase about “the sun shining down upon the Prince as he drove away” was made prophetic by an obliging climate, for after a wet morning the rain ceased a few minutes before the train arrived, and as the Royal carriages left the station a shaft of sunlight lit up the scene.

At the *Globe* office I found a table cleared for me, with paper and pencils ready, and a stream of printers' messengers waiting to rush my copy up to the compositors.

I revised my first thousand words and agreeably surprised the editor by getting the first column to his desk, set up in type, less than fifteen minutes after I entered the building. Meanwhile I was writing for dear life. In forty-five minutes two thousand words were sent up to the printers and got away. By two o'clock the papers containing my account were speeding to all parts of London.

In Search of Bread and Butter

I waited for a copy of that first edition, and then went over it carefully, removing defects due to hurried writing, and "polishing" my story, until I felt that it was not unworthy to rank beside the accounts which would be written by the famous journalists who had watched the scene at my side. Then I went out to lunch.

Later that afternoon I called on the editor to ask if he was satisfied. His answer was to show me the 6.30 edition. On the front page was my story, three columns of it, and above the story was my name, printed boldly as "Our special Commissioner."

"The proprietor liked your story so much," said the editor, "that he suggested we put your name in. So we've given you a bit of a boost."

Thus for the first time I was "featured" under my own name as the author of the "splash" story in a London newspaper.

It is that sort of thing which makes journalism so attractive to the adventurous with a flair for writing. Two days before I had been studying my finances and getting depressed thereby. During the next two days I received a number of letters from journalist friends congratulating me on that story.

I earned as much that day as I had been averaging per week, but unfortunately princes do not come home every day and in the absence of a suitable subject on which I could launch another "campaign" my income continued to dwindle.

I was still earning an average of twelve pounds a week, but this was not enough. For one thing there were expenses to be paid out of it. For another it did not enable very much to be saved—and as the income of the luckless free lance automatically stops

The Autobiography of a Journalist

every time he goes sick or feels like taking a holiday, saving is imperative.

Moreover, I felt a yearning to get back on the staff of a paper. Such staff work as I had already done had left me with a taste for producing papers which writing alone did not altogether satisfy. There are some people who are happy merely writing, and others who combine both editing and writing, and would not feel content if confined to one or the other. I resolved to look round for an editorial position which would bring me once more into touch with the machinery of paper-production while still leaving me with the leisure to write myself. It was an important decision.

I know several journalists who may be described as "born free lances" who would be unhappy confined to one paper or one office. But I know more staff men who are temperamentally unsuited to the strain of constantly producing and selling new ideas.

In my case I was still determined to keep my outlook wide enough to embrace the whole of journalism. I had managed to acquire a certain amount of experience. I was twenty-three years of age. It seemed to me I should be better off putting my ideas into a paper I helped to produce than continuing to sell them with indifferent success to various editors, many of whom, naturally enough, ran their publications on lines with which I did not agree. In other words, I had developed "ideas" about editing which I was anxious to put to the test.

My mind was finally made up by a sharp attack of influenza which kept me in my bed for three weeks. During this time I spent thirty pounds and earned not a penny.

In Search of Bread and Butter

It was while I was striving to make up this leeway that the editor of a weekly paper for whom I had been writing articles on popular and topical subjects almost weekly for some months past wrote asking me whether I was open to consider a staff position, and if so whether I would call and see him immediately.

I had already turned down one offer from the same firm because it would have left me "side-tracked" on a film paper. But this one was more promising. The weekly paper concerned was similar in type to *Tit-Bits* and *Answers*—that is to say, it covered the whole field from politics to sport and fiction in a popular manner.

It happened also to be a paper for which I had always visualised possibilities.

At eleven o'clock that morning I went to see the editor. He offered me the job of assistant editor at a salary of eight pounds a week, and explained that actually, as he had other interests, I should have the scope, if I proved competent, to be editor in all but name, and thus gain a foothold as well as valuable experience.

When I pointed out that I had a certain free-lance connection I did not want to lose, he assured me I should still be paid for my contributions to the paper, in addition to my salary, and that he had no objection to my writing for other publications providing that anything suitable was first submitted to him for consideration.

Realising that the absence of financial worry would release energies which I could utilise by writing almost as much as I had been turning out as a free lance, I accepted the offer there and then. Eight pounds a week would cover my actual living costs,

The Autobiography of a Journalist

and with freedom to free-lance in my own time I knew that my old habit of working longer hours than most people could be turned to good account, especially in view of the fact that as a staff man on a big combine I should be in touch with many likely markets where I should no longer be a stranger.

The following Monday, on a wet and bleak December day, I ingloriously terminated my career as a free lance by settling down again in an editorial chair to plan my first issue of the paper.

Balancing my accounts later, I found that during the seven months which elapsed between my return from America and the taking of this staff position my income had averaged thirteen pounds a week. Which, all things considered, was probably more than a young man of twenty-three, with my education, could reasonably hope to earn in most walks of life. But I was not satisfied.

To free-lance without tears one needs to be able to live for the first six months at least on one's capital. I had embarked on this period of free-lancing with twenty-five pounds, but to compensate for that I had the good fortune to come into contact with editors who dealt kindly with outside contributors. And I did receive one dividend as a result of those busy months. A dividend which has since paid me handsomely. When I had settled down on my new paper, the editor admitted to me that his reason for offering me the post before anyone else was that my predecessor, when consulted, pointed out that I wrote very nearly the perfect article for this particular paper. ("We never have trouble in altering his stuff" were the exact words used.) From this the editor inferred that if I had so exactly "hit" their public with my

In Search of Bread and Butter

articles, I could probably do the same thing with my ideas, and know how to "dress up" those ideas to satisfy my readers.

I mention this because it illustrates a well-known fact—that when a vacancy occurs on an editorial staff it is rarely or never advertised unless the editor or proprietor has no one in view among the contributors to whom the position could be offered. Those responsible prefer to promote an already tried man if one is available, and if not, try to choose the man whose abilities are well enough known from experience to justify the experiment.

Since then I have seen many successful careers begun under similar conditions, which indicates that free-lancing is the best possible stepping-stone, short of beginning as a junior and working up, to an editorial position.

For it must never be forgotten that Fleet Street is one of the few occupations in which you cannot choose your men by examination or rule-of-thumb methods. It is a business of ideas, and what matters more than anything else is the quality of the ideas which each member of the staff puts into the paper. Editing of any description is the most individual thing in the world. There are few rules and no landmarks. The most original and unheard-of thing may put up your circulation when none of the tried methods will budge it. Everything, therefore, depends upon picking the right men for the right job. It was in this respect that Lord Northcliffe showed his genius so plainly.

One other thing my free-lancing taught me. It opened my eyes to the difficulties and disappointments to be suffered at the hands of inconsiderate editors.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

I resolved to try to help rather than hinder those who showed promise of developing into useful contributors. That rule I have followed strictly ever since. As for the other sort, it is only cruelty to encourage them.

CHAPTER X

EDITING A WEEKLY PAPER—FIRST EFFORTS AT FICTION

THE first material advantage I observed on my return to staff work, apart from the prospect of a regular pay envelope, was the restoration of attractive working conditions, including fires, lights and hot water which did not appear as "extras" in my domestic budget.

Once again I was lucky enough to find myself under the guidance of a man whose own example was invaluable. The editor of my paper had served for over twenty years with the firm, during more than half of which he had been recognised as one of the cleverest magazine and periodical editors in Fleet Street. I remember how, during quiet spells between issues, I used to sit and turn over the pages of the file copies of my paper, and the frank admiration which I felt for many of the features thus disclosed. That man taught me that there was as much scope for striking and original ideas in a twopenny weekly as in more ambitious productions.

Those file copies quickened my determination to get personality into the paper, and from the very first week the editor encouraged my ambition. Apart from a weekly conference at which I discussed the contents of the next issue with him, I was left to handle the paper entirely alone, with the assistance of a staff as enthusiastic as myself.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

At the time I valued this freedom principally for the scope it gave me, but in the light of what was to come it proved invaluable training under the watchful eye of "an old hand."

I was fortunate too, in that my paper presented to its readers in each issue a wide variety of contents. These included a serial, several complete stories of both the adventurous and romantic variety and articles on topics of general interest. We specialised in adventure stories and true-life narratives, Nature stories and competitions. So that in the course of the week's work we covered more or less the whole field of popular journalism.

During the following weeks I put into the paper every idea of my own which was suitable for our public. Usually I wrote myself one or two articles for every issue. The editor had been one of the first to print signed articles by prominent Trades Union leaders, and because of this definitely political flavour, I was able to let myself go on political subjects.

Looking back over those early issues, I find that more than 70 per cent of the article features during the first twelve months were the result of ideas I wrote up myself, or passed over to various free lances who worked for the paper. I suppose that is the real test of editorship. If the editor does not put personality and ideas into his own paper no one else will, for no one ever knows what you are after so well as you do yourself.

Fiction was more difficult to find than articles. The post-war boom in short stories was then just beginning, and as we wanted the magazine type of short story at about half the price which the seven-penny or shilling magazines paid, it was difficult to

Editing a Weekly Paper—First Efforts at Fiction

find enough of them to fill our pages without reducing the standard.

Fortunately the editor had many friends who wrote stories, and upon whose friendship he presumed sufficiently to keep us going. But I have always been amazed when I am told by fiction writers that the market is "overstocked," for during the nine years I have been connected with that weekly paper there has never once been a week when a printable story would have been refused. On the contrary, the cry is always for more.

Lest the budding writer imagines at this point in my story that he has discovered a potential El Dorado, let me hasten to add that stories came to us in plenty—at least two hundred a week. Out of those two hundred stories from amateurs or nearly-amateurs it was a red-letter week when we found one we could use. The amount of rubbish circulated to editors is amazing. I doubt whether the art of short-story writing can be learned from books, but the expenditure of a few shillings on some of the quite excellent manuals which exist would at least save the amateur from the most elementary blunders.

For 95 per cent of my stories I had to rely upon the little band of regular contributors, most of whom actually worked for the magazines as well. The remaining 5 per cent was made up of stories accepted from beginners who seemed worthy of encouragement. Alas, the hours I have spent writing helpful letters to embryo Ethel M. Dells without unearthing one competent new-comer!

Many people imagine editors as obstructionists, who sit in their chairs grimly determined to prevent the new-comer from getting into print. If only our

The Autobiography of a Journalist

critics knew the truth! If they could hear for themselves the whoop of joy which goes up to the skies when one single new name is discovered on a manuscript which shows the slightest signs of being up to publication standard!

In the case of my paper there was, of course, a further reason for this shortage of fiction, apart from the low rates of payment offered. In Fleet Street it is manifestly true that nothing succeeds like success. Just as every article writer begins by sending his MS. to one of the famous dailies, so does the fiction writer who wishes to extend his or her markets prefer to concentrate upon the famous magazines and weeklies, and thus overlook the smaller members of these groups. This was the real reason for the shortage of fiction in our office at that time, that and the ever-extending market which kept the established writers of stories busy making hay while the sunshine lasted.

My press day was Thursday, and the next issue was due at the works, complete with all blocks, by five o'clock on the following day. Anything sent over on Monday morning was a day late. One Friday afternoon I found myself with the whole issue safely at the works with the exception of the leading story. Of this there was no sign. The staff had read everything in sight and still the wanted story was missing.

"Very well," I said, "I will write it myself this week-end. Get an illustration put in hand showing a beautiful young girl embracing an attractive young man."

I was very light-hearted about it in the office, but when I got back to my flat doubts began to assail me. Although I had often thought of trying my hand at fiction, indeed, I fully intended to become proficient

Editing a Weekly Paper—First Efforts at Fiction

in time at both novels and complete stories, I had never done so yet. Could I do it?

Experience had taught me two things which I remembered that night. One is that the really competent editor is the man or woman who can at a pinch write any single feature (apart from technical articles) himself in an emergency. If you can do that, no contributor can let you down by unpunctuality or blackmail you for more money. The second is that necessity is an irresistible driving-force. There is no spur like it.

I saw in my mind's eye that issue of my paper going to press minus the leading complete story. That could not be allowed to happen. I should lose my job and my reputation, such as it was, on the same day. There and then I sat down and began the feverish search for an idea. Any idea would do provided it would make a suitable story and contained an incident in which a beautiful young woman embraced an attractive young man.

By bedtime I had that story mapped out and directly after breakfast the next morning I began to write it.

It was slow and novel work. I think the dialogue gave me most difficulty. But I finished a five-thousand-word story in just over ten hours—the only story out of hundreds I have written since which I wrote down laboriously with a pen instead of working straight on to a typewriter or dictating to a secretary.

When I read it through I thought it was terrible. I worked late revising it and most of the next day in making a typewritten copy.

On the Monday morning I told my editor of the difficulty I was in and asked him to read the story and

The Autobiography of a Journalist

decide whether it could be used to fill the gap. He rang for me five minutes later and said it "passed muster." The issue was saved. And my editor suggested I ought to write more, so a new source of income had opened up for me as well.

The circumstances under which that first story was written are interesting, because up to the very moment when the necessity arose I had stoutly declared to friends who suggested I should turn to fiction that I could not do it, in spite of my secret determination to tackle fiction successfully later on. Even when my income was dwindling as a free lance I had not considered it worth while to explore that way out.

But when I found that at staff rates my income for the week the story appeared was increased to the extent of seven guineas, I resolved to explore further such a promising avenue of development. Moreover, the story did not read too badly in type. As had happened before in my life, that first story gave me confidence to take the next step.

I began to write a story occasionally, in addition to my article work. In the next twelve months I wrote over a dozen and sold ten of them.

A week or two after that first story was written, I had given up my Hainstead flat and gone to live in the heart of the country. The cottage was close to London but three miles from a station. Here I found that, apart from the enforced economy, the quiet of the country-side and the absence of interruptions enabled me to turn out far more work than I could get through in London.

For fifteen months I turned out stories and articles at top speed. There was very little strain about type-writing out of doors, shaded by an apple tree, during

Editing a Weekly Paper—First Efforts at Fiction

that wonderful summer of 1921. And my speed at fiction had developed to the point when I could comfortably write a story of from four to five thousand words in a day.

I did not revise these stories, experience having taught me that for a person of my type it was better to let the story stand or fall as it was set down in the first place. That may sound careless and against all the rules of good work. I do not defend it. I merely record the fact that the only story which I have written at a desk, and revised several times with the utmost care until it was "polished" to perfection, was one of three stories out of over four hundred for which I could never find a home with any magazine. There are some writers who shine in the work of revision, and some whose work comes off best if it is set down exactly as it bubbles up out of their imagination, and scarcely touched. I belong to the second category.

Here let me add that the wise writer will as soon as possible make a habit of selling only the First British Serial Rights of his fiction. Since the practice of reprinting stories by well-known authors began about five years ago many writers have lost packets of "easy money" through not possessing a record of what rights they had sold in their early stories.

I remember discussing this point with Edgar Wallace at a time when the second rights in any story of his were worth at least ten pounds.

"The trouble is," he told me, "that I haven't the faintest idea whether I possess the rights of my early stuff or whether I sold all rights. The editor who can hunt up this information for me can have the stuff on reasonable terms."

The Autobiography of a Journalist

This question of "rights" is a complicated one. The beginner will probably find that most papers and magazines insist upon buying all serial rights in his stories, but the wise author will judge the right moment when he can sell only "1st B.S.R." without risking his market or reducing his prices. From that moment he should keep file copies of everything he writes, noting on each story where it appeared, the date of publication and exactly what rights were sold.

In nine cases out of ten the ordinary author does not reach that height of fame which makes the second, third and fourth rights in his old stories valuable. But every writer hopes to be the lucky tenth, and if he is, then the fact that he has kept track of his rights may mean a useful additional income which he would otherwise have lost. I would refer those who want to study this question more fully to Michael Joseph's book, *The Commercial Side of Literature*, which deals fully with both British and foreign rights in fiction, and their exploitation.

It was after my first twelve months in the country, during which I walked three miles every morning and evening to the station, that I decided a motor-car would add to my enjoyment of the country-side. At the same time I made a further discovery. The boys' paper market, then enjoying a period of expansion which was bringing many newspapers upon the scene, was searching for new writers.

Even a modest motor-car cost £200 second-hand then, and my recently restored savings did not permit such a luxury unless it were first earned by hard work. I resolved to have that car, and to earn it by turning out sufficient extra work to pay the bill.

To this end I studied a number of the newer boys'

Editing a Weekly Paper—First Efforts at Fiction

papers. Their requirements appeared to be simple. Melodrama, and yet more melodrama. Action and “punch” in every line. Two years before I might have hesitated before telling the editor of one of those papers that I could write the sort of story he wanted, but now that my stories were appearing in the shilling magazines the difficulties of the juvenile market did not look so formidable.

I drafted out a synopsis for a series of six complete stories. I have forgotten the title, but the main idea was to hinge an exciting plot on to the broadcasting boom which was then just beginning.

In my plots the hero unearthed conspiracies against the world on his amateur-built wireless set, solved crime mysteries by the same means, while in one of them I remember a most convincing adventurer tried to blackmail the whole world by threatening to melt all the steel and iron in existence by wireless power thrown from a giant station somewhere in the Pacific which no one could locate. In the nick of time, of course, the hero found it and after much fighting and many thrills succeeded in smashing something and foiling a dastardly plot.

There were many things about that synopsis which invited criticism, but the stories certainly did not lack excitement. The editor to whom I submitted the series was, I found, looking for some one who could introduce wireless into stories and promptly commissioned the lot, subject to approval of the first story.

Each story was to be fifteen thousand words in length and the rate of payment was one guinea per thousand. This was not lordly payment, but all remuneration is relative, and I decided that if I could

The Autobiography of a Journalist

write one of those stories in a week—end it would pay me just as well as turning out shorter stories at a higher rate.

Working in my country home on Saturdays and Sundays, I turned out those six tales at the rate of one a week. They seemed to be successful. At all events they pleased the editor, who upon receiving the last of them promptly commissioned a further series which dealt with the adventures of a young pilot on the lower reaches of the Thames.

During the whole of that winter I very rarely wrote less than fifteen thousand words a week. Those boys' stories, attempted by chance, brought me in more money—at a guinea a thousand words—than I have ever earned since out of fiction in the same length of time.

Between September and March I wrote over a quarter of a million words, and sold the whole of that output with the exception of one story. This was an adventure tale dealing with Morocco and the Riff campaign, of which I had seen something at first hand during a flying visit to Tetuan and Ceuta and the nearer Riff villages a month before I wrote the yarn. This story the editor returned with the comment that it was probably true but not exciting enough! All I will say about that is that I was by no means the first writer to suffer through fidelity to facts. Nor shall I be the last. How many would-be contributors to magazines, upon being told that a certain situation is "unnatural," have replied with triumph, "But that is true—it happened." The moral of this statement, known to every editor, is that not everything which happens is suitable material for a serial or short story. Part of the art of writing a good story is basing it on

actual impressions or experiences. Recording something seen or experienced is not enough. It is wiser to adapt your raw material by drawing on imagination for your plots rather than by seeking them in the highways. Which reminds me of a famous writer of short stories who took a room under an assumed name over a fish shop in an East London slum in order to get "local colour" for his stories.

He lived there in the utmost discomfort for two months without getting a single idea. Then he returned to his home in St. John's Wood, sat down to an imposing desk in his study, and within ten minutes had got down on paper a perfectly gorgeous story plot which had nothing to do with fish shops or slums. "Local colour" is extremely useful to draw upon for details, but at a distance. If one is in the middle of it, one is liable to be too overwhelmed with impressions and can't see the wood for the trees. At least that is my experience in both reporting work and fiction.

At the end of that winter I was £250 richer than at the beginning and my motor-car was bought without depleting my savings by a single penny. Also the pen-name I had used for these boys' stories was appearing with increasing frequency in half a dozen papers and in several of the boys' "annuals" of that year.

Having proved to my satisfaction (and I hope to that of my juvenile readers as well) that I could readily write this type of fiction, I decided not to write another word of boys' fiction for at least ten years. I believe that was a wise decision.

In journalism it is unwise to concentrate on any market except the best. Just as the tree follows the inclination of the twig, so if a writer persists in

The Autobiography of a Journalist

concentrating on one type of work to the exclusion of others, he will as time goes on find it increasingly difficult to do any other sort of work.

I had no intention of becoming a writer of boys' stories, even if two such who were known to me had made £2000 a year for years past at the same modest rate of a guinea a thousand. They were the kings of their profession—one of them had filled two whole papers every week for twenty-five years and dictated his stories in a Monte Carlo hotel—and, however quickly one works, payment at the rate of a guinea a thousand words does not tempt one to specialise after the novelty has worn off.

I had doubts, after such a spell of boys' stories, about my ability to write another magazine story. The very week after I wrote my last tale of thrilling adventure, therefore, I settled down, turned out a complete story and submitted it to a magazine which had printed my work before. To my relief it was accepted. I wrote one or two more and tried other markets. When these too did not come back I decided I had had a lucky escape. My raid on the boys' market had provided an interesting adventure, experience of their requirements which has since been useful, and of course, the car. And it had not harmed my ability to write stories with perhaps some claim to merit.

The reader untutored in the daily life of Fleet Street will probably fail to understand my anxiety. To the outsider it must seem that if once you are able to write a magazine story it naturally follows you can go on doing it whenever occasion offers, however long the gaps may be between one story and another.

Editing a Weekly Paper—First Efforts at Fiction

That this is not so is pathetically shown by the ghosts of past successes who haunt editorial offices—men who could once “command their price” but who have become old-fashioned and to-day can write only one type of story, and that a type which no one wants. For there are fashions in stories as in other things, and ladies’ skirts have not changed more in the past twenty years than the British short story and the average editor’s requirements. If you doubt me, turn up any magazine for 1908 and read the stories appearing in its pages.

In my case there was another and more pressing reason for abandoning the tempting path to affluence at one guinea per thousand words. Early in my subsidiary career as a contributor to boys’ papers my editor resigned from the paper and the following week, less than a year after joining it, I was appointed editor in his stead.

I can remember still the thrill of entering for the first time that sanctum without knocking on the door, of sitting at the desk, and there away from the staff allowing the realisation to sink in that on myself primarily depended the success or failure of a weekly which had been a popular favourite with a mighty army of readers in every corner of the British Empire for nearly thirty years.

Every editor, however insignificant his paper may be, is a king within his own domain. He is responsible, in the eyes of the law, for every word that appears in his paper. Upon him lies the responsibility of keeping or losing that strange goodwill which makes many thousands of widely varying people buy and read the same paper week after week. Journalistic greenhorns are apt to think that editorship is easy, but it is not

The Autobiography of a Journalist

so. It is, done properly, one of the most highly skilled and comprehensive jobs in the world.

Ten years before I had regarded editors as beings like archbishops—apart and above the common herd. In those ten years I had progressed through journalism from writing advertisements at half a crown each to the front pages of London newspapers and now the control of a successful weekly, the readers of which, I knew, regarded every word which appeared within its covers as the ultimate truth.

I decided not to let the fact that I was still only twenty-four worry me. At fourteen I had resolved to be an editor and had learned much in the intervening years. I was under no illusions. Editorship was not a sign of success, but only the opportunity to achieve it. Circulation figures talk—in Fleet Street nothing else matters. I knew, or believed I knew, what my readers wanted. Had I not been a reader of that very paper myself?

One thing more I knew. Henceforth as long as I held my job life was going to mean doing the work for which I had been striving to fit myself all my life, I was free to develop a real paper on my own lines. Is anything else quite so wholly satisfying as that?

Since that day I have turned out books, novels, short stories, articles in an increasing stream. I have produced endless issues of papers, "discovered" new writers, worked the clock round, seen a new paper of mine touch the million mark on the first week, achieved "scoops." In short, I have known all the joys and sorrows of an editor's and an author's life. If I have limited my hours to twelve or fourteen a day it is only because there are limits which it is wise, if one would preserve good health, to observe. But

Editing a Weekly Paper—First Efforts at Fiction

for that these years have been so wonderful that I should never have wanted to leave the office at all.

Unless a man feels that way about journalism it would be better to try some other occupation. For the daily round in Fleet Street would be unutterably boring to anyone who did not possess enthusiasm as well as ideas.

For me the knowledge that I can help, perhaps only a little, some hundreds of thousands of people a week, can perhaps make a trifle easier the path of some lad who is to-day facing the same difficulties which I faced in my turn, is ample compensation for all the toil needed to produce an issue when everything goes wrong. And things do go wrong, even in Fleet Street, and when that happens, it is the editor who must put them right. No one, except the captain of a ship, occupies quite the same position of authority and responsibility as an editor.

CHAPTER XI

EDITING AND AUTHORSHIP

ONE duty common to all editors of papers concerned with current events consists of "covering" every big event—be it war, an earthquake, a royal wedding—as it happens.

The editor, when he reads about a coming General Election, must not think about the chances of the particular party he happens to favour. His own views do not matter. What matters is how he will deal with this national event in order to instruct, interest or amuse his readers.

A wise editor has no prejudices. He simply cannot afford to have any. His job is to publish articles or features dealing with every angle of contemporary life which touches his readers. Which means, when you are controlling a periodical with a circulation of anything from one hundred thousand to a million, practically everything of importance which happens.

Is there a big strike threatening? The editor must "cover it." It may be that the article he decides to run is "Can strikes be stopped?" Having decided that, he must consider possible writers and choose the one who will deal most effectively with the subject. And finally he must see that the writer chosen will write the article for a price he can afford to pay and deliver it in time to get it into the first possible issue.

Editing and Authorship

If he is the editor of a weekly paper, and hampered where articles of a topical nature are concerned by going to press three weeks before publication—as I was—he will very often find it impossible to get the article delivered in time for the next issue. When this happens, he must either risk the subject remaining “in the news” for another week, or sit down and write it himself. This is one of the reasons why the topical possibilities of a weekly paper are enormously increased if the editor is himself fully conversant with a variety of subjects.

The good editor is interested in all the main activities of our civilisation—in religion, politics, science, medicine, art, music, sport and even domestic matters. For one thing a certain amount of knowledge is necessary in order to choose both the right angle from which to deal with any given subject and the best person to write it. For another, an editor frequently finds he can secure a good article more cheaply when he writes it himself or has it written by some one on his staff than when he must pay the price demanded by an outside contributor. And all editors, except newspaper editors, must to a certain extent cut their coat according to their cloth, especially in these days when wider markets have raised the cost of a thousand words by anyone with any sort of “name” to ten guineas, and very often to thirty or forty.

Finally, the editor who has the necessary knowledge and experience to “cover” any subject himself in an emergency is never “let down.” If a given article is needed to fill an issue at the twelfth hour it is not always possible to hustle a distinguished contributor. Most people, if they write an article in a week, consider they have broken all records for speed.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

Editors are more modest. They belong to no trade union and receive no pay for overtime. But most of them have the good of their paper at heart and are quite prepared to work late and long if by so doing a poor issue can be turned into a good one.

The weekly paper over whose destinies I was presiding had little in its favour, from the editorial point of view, and presented many difficulties. It was unimportant, which meant that important people did not fall over themselves to appear in its pages ; the limits of my pay-sheet were modest, which meant the exercise of considerable tact and ingenuity to secure special articles at a price which I could afford. And I went to press over three weeks before publication, which meant a close study of every scrap of information relating to future events—and a good deal of luck besides—in order to keep the paper topical in its appeal and deal with events when they were happening and not three weeks later.

Editing that weekly really resolved itself into a most intriguing game of besting my rivals despite these handicaps. Over and over again we came out right "on top" of events which, more by luck than good judgment, I had decided might be expected to occur at about a given date.

To quote but one example, the week before the commencement of the General Strike, my issue (which had gone to press three weeks before) carried a first article entitled "Stop those Strikes" by a famous writer on Labour topics. The following issue, which came out a week late owing to the stoppage, but which had been passed for press two weeks before the strike took place, carried a leading article with the title, "*There's a good time coming—but it's a good time*

Editing and Authorship

coming," in which the writer showed that there were distinct signs of better days for industry if only the wastage of continual stoppages could be avoided, and pointed hopefully to certain trades which showed signs of improvement.

I received hundreds of letters from readers congratulating me upon being so "up-to-date," and several from other editors in Fleet Street, who had noticed this remarkable piece of topicality, asking me "how it was done."

The answer was, of course, that being a close student of politics and industrial affairs, and knowing many of the men on both sides engaged in the coal negotiations, I had come to the conclusion that this time the threat of a General Strike was not mere bluff and that the temper of Trades Unionism was such that there was an "odds on" chance of a stoppage. If no strike had occurred those articles would not have been so opportune, but they would still have made interesting reading for a public largely composed of the more intelligent type of artisan. That was the risk which it was necessary to take. It came off, luckily.

Another editor whom I know achieved an even more remarkable success in topicality. In 1914 he was handling a monthly magazine which went to press six weeks before publication. In his August issue of that year he published two articles bearing on the possibility of war in Europe. The first was entitled "Is the German Army too fat to move?" and was an account by an eye-witness of the efficiency which the Kaiser's troops had attained at that time. The second article was the first of a series dealing with the fortresses of Britain.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

When those two articles went to press there was not even a suggestion of war in Europe. When they appeared the British Expeditionary Force was already on its way to France.

The War Office could not believe that such topicality as this was the result of mere chance, and they sent for the editor to find out how he had known the war was coming! Nor were they completely satisfied when he protested that the war had surprised him as much as anyone else.

The publication of that series on the fortresses of Britain had an amusing sequel. The second article was, of course, in the press when the first appeared on the outbreak of war. It dealt with the defences of Dover, and a proof of it must have given the newly appointed censor a fit. He told the editor he was sorry, but certain parts of the article must be censored "in the public interest."

The paper was then on the machines. There was no time to get another article to fill it. But the editor was not discouraged. He had new plates made showing large chunks of the article as "blacked out" by the censor, printed an explanation and advertised in all the papers "See what the censor has done in this month's — Magazine." The censorship was then a novel thing. Other magazines had as yet hardly realised that they would have to deal with the war. The result was that that issue, thanks to the censor and a quick-witted editor, was sold out promptly on publication.

Many times during those first weeks as editor, I sat down at three o'clock on a press day and wrote a complete article in less than two hours. I paid myself for it, of course, but about one-fifth the

Editing and Authorship

amount I should have had to pay anyone else. And I knew better what I wanted. It was much the same with short stories. There were times when our stock, would not yield quite the "mixture" required. We might have had two dozen five-page stories in stock, but not one sentimental story that would fit three pages. Or perhaps a two-page crime story was what was wanted. Over and over again, instead of sending out an S.O.S. to literary agents who did not much like my rates of pay and who take time to lay their hands on suitable material, I have overcome the difficulty by sitting down in my office and writing, in a few hours, a story which, before I began, I knew would just fill the gap. An editor who cannot do that must either keep a much bigger stock than I could afford on my paper, or grow whiter of head and keep his staff late while they read and read through "possible" stuff which only too often turns out to be impossible.

And the amount of impossible fiction peddled round Fleet Street, even by the best agents, is amazing. Quite recently I read over two hundred stories in a single week, mostly by experienced writers, without finding more than one which was worth using. I do not place the responsibility for this state of affairs entirely at the doors of the literary schools, for the idea that any Tom, Dick or Harry can write dies hard, and at the most the schools have only encouraged people to believe what they would have believed in any case. But how often have I longed to send to would-be, but hopeless, contributors, not the usual polite personal note of rejection (for I hate rejection-slips—I received too many myself), but a letter stating briefly, "Dear Sir,—There are 200,000

The Autobiography of a Journalist

people trying to write in this country and perhaps 40,000 of these have the slightest chance of ever getting anything printed. You are not, judging by the enclosed story, likely to be one of these. I advise you to save postage."

Such a letter would not discourage anyone in whom burned, however dim, the true light of journalism or authorship. It might save many people who have not the remotest idea of the first principles of the writing game from the inevitable disappointment later on. For one can usually recognise the signs of promise, even in the most amateur manuscript, if they exist at all. And, as I have said, every editor is always seeking them. But what can an editor say to a would-be contributor who, having utterly failed at short stories after many attempts, comes to the office and asks him to commission a serial story "as I have decided that is more the sort of thing I want to write."

It is useless, in such a case, to point out that it takes a whole day out of a week already too short to read a serial, and that an editor can only spare the time when there is justification for supposing it will not be wasted. Before such optimism and nerve, one can only stand in silent wonder. The tragedy is that these people often waste months or even years in hopeless struggle before they are forced to recognise the inevitable. Women with small incomes of their own are the worst offenders in this respect. In their case starvation does not drive them to work which they can do, and they often continue to plague long-suffering assistant-editors for years after the editor has done his best to choke them off.

What interested me more than anything else in those days, however, was the wide field which I had

Editing and Authorship

to cover in the course of each week's work. There are few things in life more thrilling, or so it seems to me, than the knowledge that tens of thousands of people look forward each week to a selection of articles and stories which you have prepared for them. If you gauge their interests accurately their pleasure is reflected in the circulation figures and in their letters to the editor. If you deal with subjects which do not arouse their interest, then the circulation figures quickly strike a warning note.

In that fact there is at once a source of strength and a grave responsibility. For one can never forget that if a definite statement is made upon any big subject of public interest, thousands who read the article will have their opinions coloured by what is said. It is a responsibility which editors regard more seriously than many critics of the Press would have us believe.

If any of my readers doubt the truth of this statement, let me assure them that while in the large towns the multiplicity of papers has to a certain extent destroyed the "influence" of and faith in any particular organ, in the North and in the country such a paper as mine enjoys the loyalty of great masses of readers who accept without question as "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" the lightest statement appearing in a paper upon whose word they are accustomed to rely.

Many a time I have received letters from readers who have backed statements made in my paper with good money which they could ill afford to lose, confident that "their paper" would not mislead them. Having done that, they write and ask for evidence that such and such a statement is correct,

The Autobiography of a Journalist

so that they may vindicate their faith and win the bet.

I have tested that loyalty in another direction, by asking my readers to do something for me. I have run a small competition, with comparatively insignificant prizes, admitting that they are small but asking my readers to rally round the editor and make it a great success. The last time I did that, upon an occasion of no importance to anyone except myself, the number of entries received—at what was normally a dull time of the year—broke all records, even those made by competitions in which the first prize was six times as large. These are the things which compensate the harassed editor for any number of late nights and any amount of trouble, for who would not strive to do his or her best to repay such loyalty?

Editing is the corner-stone upon which rests the prosperity of every successful paper. If the contents are not up to date, if the editor is not in tune with the interests of his readers, then nothing can save a paper from decline and death. Handling a paper needs Mr. H. G. Wells's "continuous urge," just as the journalist himself needs the same impulse. To seek to fill a paper with new ideas about summer holidays or Christmas as these seasons come round year after year, is difficult, but it must be accomplished somehow if the paper is to thrive. I can think of no person who would be so popular in Fleet Street as the contributor who brought in a batch of really new Christmas ideas early in November.

But if the editor must supply the ideas, which are the driving-force of every paper, others must sell it. The best editor in the world would not hold his job

Editing and Authorship

for long if he could not co-operate with the advertising department and the business managers.

These are the men who exploit to the full the possibilities in the papers which he produces, and to a great extent they rely upon the editor to "feed" them. Many a time, by enlisting the assistance of an efficient circulation manager, I have squeezed a welcome five thousand extra sale out of an issue which would otherwise have gone only to the same readers as the previous one.

For this reason an editor must also be a business man, with a sense of salesmanship. He must know which names in the literary firmament (within reach of his pay-sheet) are "pulling best" and seek to get them into his paper. He must be able to devise "selling" posters at a moment's notice. And in these days, it must be added, he must also be able to judge the respective merits of circulation schemes of all kinds.

These things are not journalism, but they sell periodicals. Having accomplished that much, the paper itself must do the rest. If a reasonable percentage of the new readers attracted by a big feature or some special scheme "stick"—that is, become regular readers—then one may be sure that the paper is attractive.

One of my biggest thrills as an editor is that derived from securing a special article after perhaps months spent in hunting down my man. And deciding in a matter of minutes, perhaps, on press day how we can deal with that earthquake, or sea disaster, or train wreck which is filling the evening papers of that day. Then the old newspaper training proves invaluable. It teaches one to decide upon the article,

The Autobiography of a Journalist

get it written and away while your rival editor is wondering whether he will deal with it or not. It also enables one to decide, almost by instinct, which news story is going to grow into something bigger while your issue is in the press, and which will "fizzle out" within a day or so and can safely be left alone.

It was perhaps natural that, through constantly dealing with news events, the day should come when I wanted to write something of greater consequence than could be put within the compass of short weekly articles. Imperceptibly, year by year, I had been widening my horizons ever since I entered Fleet Street. First only newspaper articles, then articles of any sort. Then fiction and now editing. Still I sought further avenues of expression.

Particularly was this the case in regard to politics. Since before the war I had made a close study of various political problems, particularly those relating to the slums and industry. While I had been living on a few shillings a week myself, or collecting rents three days a week, I had been, perhaps subconsciously, absorbing first-hand information about the poor and their outlook. And since those days I had in many ways kept in touch both with social organisations and the lives of the workers.

If I had chosen my method of using this knowledge I should have tried to enter the House of Commons. Five years ago I was offered the candidature of a large London constituency by one of the political parties. But I was too much interested in my Fleet Street work to abandon it for the sake of a political career.

Instead I spoke a little, wrote numerous articles for both my own papers and others upon political

Editing and Authorship

subjects, assisted one or two M.P.'s, whom I knew to organise their election campaigns and so by easy steps came to my next decision—which was to put my ideas about present-day politics into a novel.

I was warned, of course, that there is "no money" in any sort of political book except the weighty treatises published at a high price, but that did not worry me. For the first time in my life I felt wealthy enough to write something because I wanted to and not because I needed money for my rent or to provide bread and butter. I decided to devote my week-ends for a few months to writing a novel which would reveal to some of those who never went to political meetings what the average working man was thinking at that time.

I will not say that it was a good novel, although it was well reviewed. But it was an outspoken novel, which did not mince matters. At all events I wrote eighty thousand words, for which I received twenty-five pounds. For the same amount of fiction, even if written for my own paper at the lowest rates, I should have been paid nearly two hundred pounds. So although I may have been misguided in my enterprise, I was not gold-digging, nor using my knowledge for my own ends. Rather did I regard the novel as an opportunity, now that I had reached the point when my writings were published, of keeping faith with those among whom I had lived during my earlier years, and whose thoughts, aims and ambitions were still imperfectly understood by those who had never gained the friendship and trust of the poor.

That first book of mine may have brought in no money, but it paid me a dividend in solid satisfaction.

I already knew several of the leading figures in the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

House of Commons ; many of them had from time to time written for me. After the publication of my book I met many more. Several little groups of M.P's. dined me at the House and offered to help me in a political career if I contemplated leaving Fleet Street. The headmasters of several public schools read it and wrote to me, saying that they appreciated so complete a picture of people with whom it was difficult for them to keep in touch.

That novel did, however, leave me with a desire to combine my own specialised "constituency" provided by my readers with a new one, to be composed of those who might read any further books I might write.

Dire necessity, to "get on" by my own efforts, and to earn the wherewithal to house, feed and clothe myself, coupled with an alert imagination, had long ago taught me the trick of working straight on to a typewriter without any preliminary drafting by hand. When free-lancing I had set myself to write at least four thousand words a day, and that first book—I confess it without shame after what the reviewers said about it—was written in chunks of five thousand words at a time.

During the next three years I wrote eight further books, mostly of a political nature and only one of them a novel. Once again I discovered what I had learnt when dropping the writing of gossip paragraphs—that many subjects which in the past I had made the subject of a magazine article of five thousand words and then forgotten might have been extended, with a certain amount of thought and research, into books.

Naturally, in the case of a book one needs more

Editing and Authorship

than a superficial knowledge of the subject. I was lucky, for in the course of editing there were certain topical subjects which for the sake of my paper I had had to study consistently over a period of nearly ten years. Moreover, my work had brought me into touch with most of the leading authorities and taught me just where to lay my hands upon any information needed.

In certain cases the journalistic instinct can be usefully combined with more serious work. One of the most successful books with which I was concerned was a political survey on a subject which was highly topical at the moment when an author called and asked me whether I would collaborate with him if the book were commissioned.

We saw the publisher together and, wonder of wonders, that publisher not only gave us generous terms but agreed to revise his autumn programme in order to "clear the decks" and rush out our book without a moment's delay.

The following Saturday we got to work. Both of us put all our spare time into the task, and as we wrote the publisher hurried our output, even half-chapters, to the printers.

The result was that a twelve and sixpenny volume, fully illustrated, and seventy-five thousand words in length, including certain chapters of a highly technical nature, was written in seven weeks, and published a fortnight later—surely a record. Certainly the biggest "hustle" I have ever attempted. And if, in order to be more topical on that subject than even the monthly magazines, we had no time for "polishing," the result was evidently not so bad, for we had over two hundred reviews from British

The Autobiography of a Journalist

and American papers and literary weeklies, not a few of which congratulated both authors and publishers on getting the book on the market less than three weeks after events recorded in it had occurred. Actually our speed implied working all hours rather than slovenly writing, and the reception that book received both in this country, India and the United States, showed that my journalistic instinct had not been at fault.

All my books, except the novels, have been published in the United States. The most successful of all has up to the present sold about twelve thousand copies in the two countries. This was a book with an educational appeal, and it has been "sponsored" by the educational authorities of four countries—Britain, United States, India and Australia.

I mention these facts merely as facts, and because they are part of the adventure which I am relating. As in the case of journalism, so in authorship I found that, provided one could get the right idea and express it adequately, the fact that one was unknown was no bar to publication.

When I hear would-be authors declaring that publishers are only interested in "names" and will not trouble seriously to consider the work of unknown writers I hear the echo of similar stories about editors (already refuted so far as my papers are concerned) and I refrain with difficulty from pointing out that (1) the first book I ever wrote was sold to the second publisher who saw it—within two days of the MS. reaching my literary agent; (2) that I have never written a book which has not been published, despite the fact that my work in that direction is still comparatively "unknown" even to-day, and (3) that

Editing and Authorship

twice already I have without any difficulty secured fresh contracts with different publishers for further books upon more generous terms than my first contracts with them. In fact, my difficulty has been to avoid contracting for more books than I can write in the limited leisure time I can devote to them after putting in a sixty-hour week on my editorial duties. This, I may add, is not due to the merit of such books as I have already written, but rather to a much simpler fact—and one which would-be authors might with advantage bear in mind—the fact that a journalistic instinct has made it possible for me to put up each year a number of acceptable suggestions to publishers for books that no one else seems to have thought of. For publishers, like editors, are always looking out for the man who can see an opening for a book which covers new ground, rather than the sort of book which follows closely on the heels of similar books already published.

Here let me express an opinion, for which in my capacity of editor I am often asked, about literary agents. A good agent can do more to guide, assist and encourage a struggling author than anyone else on earth. I do not believe that all publishers are spiders sitting in their parlours waiting for the innocent author to walk unwarily in, but I have found that publishers have a way, when dealing direct with a new author, of presenting him with a contract which, while fair in the main, may contain small points which they know no experienced agent would allow a client to accept. Little points concerning American rights, thirteen copies as twelve, foreign translations and the rendering of accounts twice a year instead of once.

The Autobiography of a Journalist

For this reason, and because a good agent can often "shape up" and improve an author's vague idea into a most promising one and fit it to the most likely publisher, I believe a good agent to be essential. Or at least to make success easier.

As an editor I am dealing constantly with almost every literary agency in London, and many of those in New York. I find the suggestions which I receive from them most helpful. And I take my own medicine, for all my books have been handled by my agent—even those which I had already sold before he knew anything about them. And by comparing my own contracts, prepared and negotiated on my behalf, with those accepted by my friends who deal direct with publishers, I find that my agent has saved me considerably more money than the sum-total of his commission to date.

The writing of these books in some cases yielded an extra dividend in the shape of series of articles for my paper. Considered only as articles, the work and expense of preparing them would have put the project beyond the reach of my editorial purse, but by using them in both book and serial form I profited both as editor and author.

My books, however, were in the nature of a "sideline"—interesting and pleasing in their way—but in no sense a substitute for my real mission, which was to give my band of readers the mixture of articles and fiction every week which would best please them. The time may come when the idea of earning my bread by writing books in the sunshine of southern Europe will exercise an irresistible attraction. At present I would not exchange my London desk, which is a clearing-house for the work of most of the

Editing and Authorship

best-known authors and journalists of the day, for any other life on earth.

For over six years I produced that weekly paper which will always remain in my memory as my "first love" (for I was editor in name only of the film weekly with which I was associated earlier). Into it I put all the ideas, all the big names and all the experiments and attractions which came into my mind, or were suggested by loyal contributors. On it I made new "discoveries" who are now well-known writers. And, as I have said, in the matter of topicality we triumphantly overcame the handicap of going to press three weeks ahead, and managed to keep abreast of our luckier rivals.

Six years after putting to press my first issue as editor promotion came for me. I was chosen as editor of a second weekly paper bigger, more famous and better known than my first.

Had it meant leaving my first command I do not think I should have accepted, so strong is the bond which can be forged between an editor and the inanimate child of his brain. But happily my firm wished me to combine the two editorships, and the choice did not have to be made.

The next week, and every week since, I faced the task of filling two papers between each Monday and Saturday. Getting through two press days. Thinking out twice as many ideas of the right sort, and buying twice as much material. And I have been at least twice as happy.

My two papers give me command of a circulation which very nearly breaks all records for weekly papers. My "constituency" covers a million homes from Land's End to John o' Groat's and wherever the

The Autobiography of a Journalist

British language is spoken. My post-bag contains hundreds of letters every day of the year from readers in all parts of the world.

There my story reaches the present day. I believe it is worth telling—if only to encourage those who are treading the same path. For my part I still marvel at the fact that the village boy who sent articles to those two very papers, only to get them back with printed rejection-slips, not so very many years ago, should to-day be presiding over their destinies with the portraits of a long line of distinguished past editors on the walls of his room.

To-day he sits in their chair and in his hands rests their traditions and the good name they created. The very fact that such miracles are possible in modern Fleet Street is the reason why we journalists regard our occupation as the most romantic of all.

Fleet Street calls. We go—from village, town or city—because we must.

CHAPTER XII

REFLECTIONS

LOOKING back over the twenty years which have passed since I earned my first half-crown, I cannot claim any spectacular success. Many of the brilliant younger generation of writers who have entered Fleet Street since the war are already famous while I am still only a working journalist. They have made their names, and with names their twenty guineas per thousand words, while I am still content to accept more modest recompense for my labours. I can, however, claim that no one is more sure of having chosen his life's work wisely than I am. If I were starting out in life again I should begin the same struggle to reach Fleet Street and feel the same thrill when I eventually got there. I might profit by the mistakes made during that first striving, but on the other hand I should probably make others.

Most certainly I should stick to the same recipe for success—hard work and big output. Given the ideas and the flair for modern journalism, there is no surer road to journalistic competence.

In deciding thus, I should only be pointing the moral of my own experiences. Whether you regard journalism as a satisfying career depends upon what you expect of it. It does not do to expect too much, for to all except the lucky few who travel, via directorships, into the exalted realm of finance, there are

The Autobiography of a Journalist

limitations. Let me illustrate what I mean by relating the story of an internationally famous art dealer who came to me recently to discuss letting his youngest son "enter journalism." This man had made by his brains and his capital an income which cannot have been less than £20,000 a year for the past thirty years. He expected that his son, when he reached "the top of the tree" in Fleet Street, would be able to command a salary approximating to that amount.

In reply I pointed out that £5000 a year was an exceptional salary in the newspaper and periodical world; that the editor of the Sunday newspaper on which I worked was paid £1500 a year. That from a successful book published at 12s. 6d. one might hope to make £500, with a further £500 or probably less if there were any serial or American rights which could be sold. And that nine books out of every ten are not as successful as that. I pointed out that probably the average income of my contributors, among whom are the best known and most successful free-lance writers of recent years, would probably average about £1000 a year. Finally, I estimated that if he himself cared to write his own fascinating life-story to a length of 80,000 words, he might expect to make at least £600 out of it.

His answer was interesting.

"No boy of mine shall enter such a poorly paid profession," he said. "As for my life-story, who would expect me to spend perhaps months getting it on paper for a miserable six hundred pounds when I made that sum in five minutes by buying and selling a picture at Christie's the other day?"

For the young man who wants a career affording chances of "plums" like that, journalism does not

Reflections

offer many "glittering prizes." Rather, it attracts before all others the men who feel that to "express themselves," to work at something which gives them an outlet for their ideas, is in itself worth the sacrifice of the fleshpots.

A few men have entered Fleet Street without a penny and retired thirty years later with fortunes varying from forty thousand pounds upwards—all made out of popular journalism. A few more have migrated from journalism to authorship and there found greater scope for their talents. Some have successfully combined authorship with journalism, notably Sir Philip Gibbs. Gibbs, as he has related in his *Adventures in Journalism*, knew desperate necessity following the stoppage of the *Tribune*, and his old colleagues do not begrudge him his success. The multiplicity of markets to-day, with the growing demand for fiction and the constant stream of new papers, makes the new-comer's chances rosier than were those of the pre-war journalist.

The increasing interest of American editors in the best work of British writers is another source of legitimate hope for our writers to-day. The biggest "plum"—and the most unexpected—which ever dropped into my lap was a cheque for sixty pounds—50 per cent of the proceeds of syndicating a single article of two thousand words in the United States just when the subject was topical.

There is another aspect of a journalistic career which the wise beginner will consider carefully before deciding to enter Fleet Street. A journalist's job is the most individualistic on earth—his sole capital is his own brain. However successful a journalist may be, he ends his life without any "goodwill," apart

The Autobiography of a Journalist

from his name and reputation, to pass on to his children. And very often without any hope of a pension upon which to rely for rest from labour.

However successful he may be, he is building for his proprietors and not for himself. All that I have learned about the inside finances of Fleet Street convince me that the present owners of the Press are far more generous to their employees than the public know. Men broken in health have been sent round the world and drawn their full salary while away. Men forced by ill-health to retire have been generously treated and found themselves free from financial worry. But in most cases it is not possible for a journalist to be *certain* that, whatever happens, he will be safeguarded against want. The best of editors have been known to disagree so violently with the policy of their proprietors that they have walked out and been forced to live on their savings. That is why most of them will tell you that from their earnings, before spending them, they must deduct 20 per cent at least and invest it in safe securities, so that if and when their brain refuses to produce ideas that sell their papers, they may not be destitute.

Men of equal ability in the field of modern business have, with less effort, established businesses which are their own, and which continue to yield them and their successors a handsome income long after they have ceased to direct their affairs personally. That is part of the price which every journalist pays for the joy of being "the architect of his own fortune" and following the most romantic calling in modern life.

Having dealt fairly, as I think, with the disadvantages of journalism let us summarise some of the advantages.

Reflections

In no other occupation on earth is it possible to earn a thousand pounds a year so easily and pleasantly—always assuming one possesses the necessary talent for giving editors what they want or for editing itself.

In twenty years, despite severe handicaps, I have watched my income grow from half a crown a week to two thousand pounds a year. That is the reward which journalism has paid me in the material sense.

But more important than that is the interest it has added to my life. Journalism has brought me into personal contact with most of the men and women in public life. I can number statesmen, authors, explorers, great heads of businesses, famous soldiers, doctors, scientists, society people, eccentrics and dynamic people in a hundred other walks of life among my friends, not one of whom I would have met or known even how to talk to but for the wide horizon of my daily round. And nothing I have experienced gives life such meaning and attraction as the company of those who are shaping the history of our times. The fact that when anything important happens in any part of the world I can go and discuss its effects and have it interpreted to me by some friend whose name and achievements command world-wide respect is not the least of the rewards which journalism has given me.

It is because of this close connection between contemporary events and the daily round that journalism is more satisfying than authorship to the practically minded writer. Journalism is closer to life.

Moreover, as a journalist I can get my message into a million homes every week where books, apart from

The Autobiography of a Journalist

the cheapest and most sensational fiction, are unknown. Many editors of popular papers may secretly wish they were handling a fortnightly political review whose opinions cause politicians to sit up and take notice. But that is because journalists are as susceptible to prestige and dignity as other men. Who would not rather be known as the poverty-stricken writer of great music than the richest purveyor of jazz tunes?

And in popular journalism all the tunes are not so jazzy. Since I began editing it has always been my belief that the man who has the confidence of millions of ordinary people, who can get them to read whatever he gives them, has greater opportunities, carefully utilised, for educating the national mind than the editors of all the exclusive reviews published to-day. I say carefully utilised, for it is obvious that if an editor flies too high his circulation will suffer, and his power for good dwindle.

It is impossible to draw the line between purely ephemeral journalism, and the article which expounds in simple language a truth which the headmaster of Eton would not be ashamed to sponsor. Yet the dividing-line is there, and I know from experience how much help and enlightenment can be put into the pages of a popular weekly which its readers would not listen to if given them in any other form. To illustrate this, I may add that one editor who numbers his readers by hundreds of thousands in the humblest homes in the land told me recently that the most successful feature in his paper is an editorial talk which contains more sound philosophy and common-sense advice on right living than is contained in any other weekly feature in journalism. He could not

Reflections

sell a copy on such stuff. But the thousands who buy that paper for its competitions, or articles on greyhound racing, or perhaps because of a poster with some such appeal as "Should girls reveal their past?" will fill his letter-bag with complaints if that weekly dose of educational wisdom is omitted from a single issue.

In the same way another editor has discovered that his biggest "draw" in a weekly paper which has no highbrow pretensions is an article written by a famous preacher who is noted for his fearless comments upon life. That preacher was once chided for writing in a "popular" paper. For answer he showed his critic a letter from a miner in Doncaster, who wrote :

"I think you may like to know that your recent article on 'Life's Silver Lining' was voted the best thing we had read for years by the lads at my pit. We bought six copies and pasted it up on the entrances to the cages, so that all the fellows could read it while they were waiting to go down for their shift."

"As long as I can reach those men I am proud to write for that paper," commented the preacher, who evidently realises that one such article, going into a quarter of a million homes, may do more real good than a dozen sermons preached in fashionable London churches before congregations well endowed with this world's goods.

Because of the undoubted influence of those weekly papers which are not exclusively devoted to the more sordid interests in daily life, I regard it as most important that they should be controlled by editors

The Autobiography of a Journalist

with ideals as well as ideas. It is as vital to the public good that an editor should be a reformer as it is in the case of a man who devotes himself to social-welfare work. Nor, if the editor knows his business, need the paper suffer. On the contrary. Indeed, I will go so far as to say that no paper, however popular, that does not believe in *something* can continue to be prosperous.

In all secular or religious matters the efficient editor must give all sides a hearing. Even so, he may not please all his readers. I have in turn been accused of turning my papers into Conservative tracts, Liberal pamphlets and Labour "rags." But as I have always observed the policy of printing anything of interest without comment, and without necessarily agreeing with the arguments advanced, I can afford to ignore such protests, knowing that the great mass of my readers appreciate a paper which presents all sides of a question.

Religion is a thorny subject. Begin a series touching upon some point of controversy, such as the revised Prayer Book, and however many articles you print giving the points of view of various parties and creeds, more will write wishing to contribute, and if you tell them, quite truthfully, that there is a limit to the space which you can devote to such a topic, will immediately accuse you of prejudice and suppressing the truth. I was accused on those very grounds recently by an obscure sect which possesses no influence and not six churches in the whole of England. Yet they did not hesitate to say that in suppressing their view and printing that of such bodies as the Church of England, Catholics and prominent Nonconformist churches I was guilty of partisanship.

Reflections

Despite such drawbacks, however, it is worth while adopting a bold policy and placing the facts of any controversy before your readers. For the great bulk of the public are reasonable people, who appreciate the help which such articles afford them in so simplifying the issues that they can form an opinion.

A few months ago I told the organiser of one of our great political parties when he suggested I should "leave Fleet Street and come into the House of Commons where you can do some good," that I believe the man who can send his message into a million homes makes an infinitely more valuable contribution to national thought than the average back-bench M.P. at Westminster. At all events I find that those same members do not usually require second invitations if I offer them space in my papers to get their views before the public.

A defence of popular journalism seems to be needed. The surprising thing to me is not that so much of our modern journalism is so bad, but that it is so good. As Mr. Neville Chamberlain has put it, "The journalist is always working against time and I sometimes think there is no more wonderful achievement of our modern civilisation than the production of a daily newspaper."

I could wish that more people appreciated the labours of the Press. I confess that while working on a newspaper I could never see anyone glance over a copy of the paper I had stopped all night to produce and throw it down with the remark, "What a dull paper. No news to-day," without a feeling that journalists have to put up with a lot at the hands of the public.

Journalism and literature are essentially different,

The Autobiography of a Journalist

of course. One is the product of leisure, the other of speed. To quote a clever definition attributed to Mr. J. L. Garvin, "In literature you can nurse your theme, lead up to it, play lightly with it. In journalism you have to put down your best card first, play your ace at once."

Every age gets a higher standard of journalism than it deserves, for the simple reason that man for man, and woman for woman, journalists are always better informed than their readers. They also pack more into life than anyone else, meet more people who are interesting, see more great events, gain more information, read more books, see more plays and watch more of their own thoughts and opinions getting in print, than anyone else except perhaps a member of the British Cabinet. And occasionally some journalist will see in a war, a famine, or some other "scoop" his chance of fame and take it. Then he ceases to be only a journalist, and becomes a public man, a lecturer, author or politician.

That is, perhaps, why there is never any shortage of would-be journalists searching Fleet Street for a job. Why, hardly a single man on the provincial papers does not regard Fleet Street as the Mecca of his craft, the magnet of the world. It has been said that the growth of correspondence schools and colleges of journalism has flooded the street with fifth-rate writers. That seems too harsh a judgment. The fifth-rate writers were always there. They pester every editor with manuscripts. But not for long. For economic laws operate in Fleet Street as elsewhere. And either the fifth-rate writer sees his chance and becomes a second or first-rate one, or he drifts out, dispirited and disillusioned. No man who

Reflections

cannot keep pace with modern life and constantly improve his ideas can last long. Every established journalist dreads the morning when he may wake up and find that he has become old-fashioned—a back number. We all take that risk, but it is great fun while it lasts. And if you are a born journalist it lasts until eyes grow dim and the pen falls at last from fingers limp with age. Whether the fun is worth the toil, the slogging, the late nights, the hunt for ideas when the brain is tired, the risks of being pushed aside by some younger and brighter man, everyone must judge for himself. I made my decision when I had not twopence to buy a stamp and have never regretted it.

